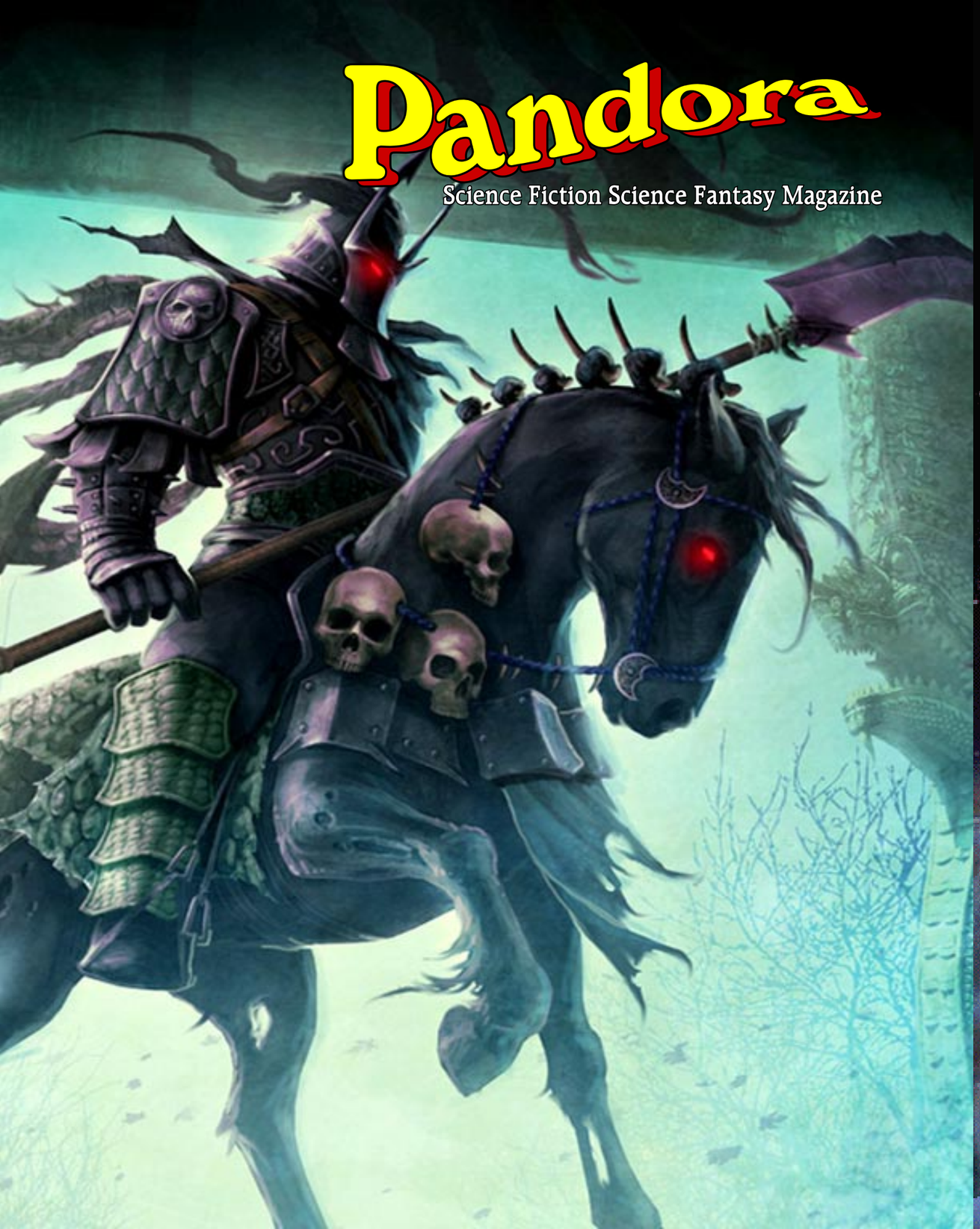

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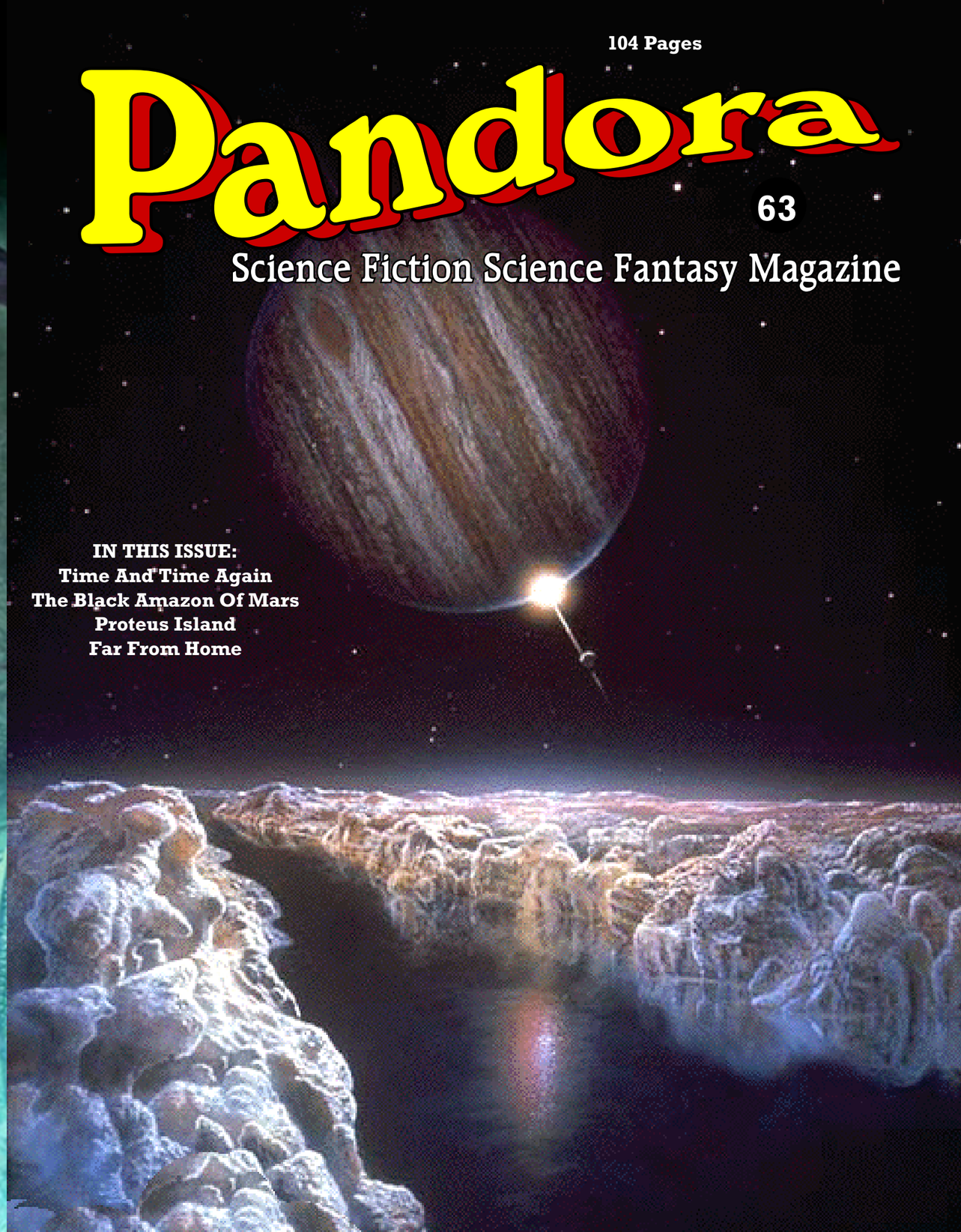

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Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine

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TIME AND TIME AGAIN

To upset the stable, mighty stream of time would probably take an enormous concentration of energy. And it's not to be expected that a man would get a second chance at life. But an atomic bomb might accomplish both...

Blinded by the bomb-flash and numbed by the narcotic injection, he could not estimate the extent of his injuries, but he knew that he was dying. Around him, in the darkness, voices sounded as through a thick wall.

"They mighta left mosta these Joes where they was. Half of them won't even last till the truck comes."

"No matter; so long as they're alive, they must be treated," another voice, crisp and cultivated, rebuked. "Better start taking names, while we're waiting."

"Yes, sir." Fingers fumbled at his identity badge. "Hartley, Allan: Captain, G5, Chem. Research AN/73/D. Serial, SO-23869403J."

"Allan Hartley!" The medic officer spoke in shocked surprise. "Why, he's the man who wrote 'Children of the Mist', 'Rose of Death', and 'Conqueror's Road'!"

He tried to speak, and must have stirred; the corpsman's voice sharpened.

"Major, I think he's part conscious. Mebbe I better give him 'nother shot."

"Yes, yes; by all means, sergeant."

Something jabbed Allan Hartley in the back of the neck. Soft billows of oblivion closed in upon him, and all that remained to him was a tiny spark of awareness, glowing alone and lost in a great darkness.

* * * * *

The Spark grew brighter. He was more than a something that merely

knew that it existed. He was a man, and he had a name, and a military rank, and memories. Memories of the searing blue-green flash, and of what he had been doing outside the shelter the moment before, and memories of the month-long siege, and of the retreat from the north, and memories of the days before the War, back to the time when he had been little Allan Hartley, a schoolboy, the son of a successful lawyer, in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

His mother he could not remember; there was only a vague impression of the house full of people who had tried to comfort him for something he could not understand. But he remembered the old German woman who had kept house for his father, afterward, and he remembered his bedroom, with its chintz-covered chairs, and the warm-colored patch quilt on the old cherry bed, and the tan curtains at the windows, edged with dusky red, and the morning sun shining through them. He could almost see them, now.

He blinked. He could see them!

* * * * *

For a long time, he lay staring at them unbelievingly, and then he deliberately closed his eyes and counted ten seconds, and as he counted, terror gripped him. He was afraid to open them again, lest he find himself blind, or gazing at the filth and wreckage of a blasted city, but when he reached ten, he forced himself to look, and gave a sigh of relief. The sunlit curtains and the sun-gilded mist outside were still there.

He reached out to check one sense against another, feeling the rough monk's cloth and the edging of maroon silk thread. They were tangible as well as visible. Then he saw that the back of his hand was unscarred. There should have been a scar, souvenir of a rough-and-tumble brawl of his cub reporter days. He examined both hands closely. An instant later, he had sat up in bed and thrown off the covers, partially removing his pajamas and inspecting as much of his body as was visible.

It was the smooth body of a little boy.

That was ridiculous. He was a man of forty-three; an army officer, a chemist, once a best-selling novelist. He had been married, and divorced ten years ago. He looked again at his body. It was only twelve years old. Fourteen, at the very oldest. His eyes swept the room, wide with wonder. Every detail was familiar: the flower-splashed chair covers; the table that served as desk and catch-all for his possessions; the dresser, with its mirror stuck full of pictures of aircraft. It was the bedroom of his childhood home. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed. They were six inches too short to reach the floor.

For an instant, the room spun dizzily; and he was in the grip of utter panic, all confidence in the evidence of his senses lost. Was he insane? Or delirious? Or had the bomb really killed him; was this what death was like? What was that thing, about "ye become as little children"? He started to laugh, and his juvenile larynx made giggling sounds. They seemed funny, too, and aggravated his mirth. For a little while, he was on the edge of hysteria and then, when

he managed to control his laughter, he felt calmer. If he were dead, then he must be a discarnate entity, and would be able to penetrate matter. To his relief, he was unable to push his hand through the bed. So he was alive: he was also fully awake, and, he hoped, rational. He rose to his feet and prowled about the room, taking stock of its contents.

There was no calendar in sight, and he could find no newspapers or dated periodicals, but he knew that it was prior to July 18, 1946. On that day, his fourteenth birthday, his father had given him a light .22 rifle, and it had been hung on a pair of rustic forks on the wall. It was not there now, nor ever had been. On the table, he saw a boys' book of military aircraft, with a clean, new dustjacket: the flyleaf was inscribed: To Allan Hartley, from his father, on his thirteenth birthday, 7/18 '45. Glancing out the window at the foliage on the trees, he estimated the date at late July or early August, 1945: that would make him just thirteen.

His clothes were draped on a chair beside the bed. Stripping off his pajamas, he donned shorts, then sat down and picked up a pair of lemon-colored socks, which he regarded with disfavor. As he pulled one on, a church bell began to clang. St. Boniface, up on the hill, ringing for early Mass: so this was Sunday. He paused, the second sock in his hand.

There was no question that his present environment was actual. Yet, on the other hand, he possessed a set of memories completely at variance with it. Now, suppose, since his environment were not an illusion, everything else were? Suppose all these troublesome memories were no more than a dream? Why, he was just little Allan Hartley, safe in his room on a Sunday morning, badly scared by a nightmare! Too much science fiction, Allan: too many comic books!

That was a wonderfully comforting thought, and he hugged it to him contentedly. It lasted all the while he was buttoning up his shirt and pulling on his pants, but when he reached for his shoes, it evaporated. Ever since he had wakened, he realized, he had been occupied with thoughts utterly incomprehensible to any thirteen-year-old: even thinking in words that would have been so much Sanscrit to himself at thirteen. He shook his head regretfully. The just-a-dream hypothesis went by the deep six.

He picked up the second shoe and glared at it as though it were responsible for his predicament. He was going to have to be careful. An unexpected display of adult characteristics might give rise to some questions he would find hard to answer credibly. Fortunately, he was an only child: there would be no brothers or sisters to trip him up. Old Mrs. Stauber, the housekeeper, wouldn't be much of a problem: even in his normal childhood, he had bulked like an intellectual giant in comparison to her. But his father...

Now, there the going would be tough. He knew that shrewd attorney's mind, whetted keen on a generation of lying and reluctant witnesses. Sooner or

later, he would forget for an instant and betray himself. Then he smiled, remembering the books he had discovered, in his late 'teens, on his father's shelves and recalling the character of the openminded agnostic lawyer. If he could only avoid the inevitable unmasking until he had a plausible explanatory theory.

* * * * *

Blake Hartley was leaving the bathroom as Allan Hartley opened his door and stepped into the hall. The lawyer was bare-armed and in slippers: at forty-eight, there was only a faint powdering of gray in his dark hair, and not a gray thread in his clipped mustache. The old Merry Widower, himself, Allan thought, grinning as he remembered the white-haired but still vigorous man from whom he'd parted at the outbreak of the War.

"'Morning, Dad," he greeted.

"'Morning, son. You're up early. Going to Sunday school?"

Now there was the advantage of a father who'd cut his first intellectual tooth on Tom Paine and Bob Ingersoll: attendance at divine services was on a strictly voluntary basis.

"Why, I don't think so: I want to do some reading, this morning."

"That's always a good thing to do," Blake Hartley approved. "After breakfast, suppose you take a walk down to the station and get me a Times." He dug in his trouser pocket and came out with a half dollar. "Get anything you want for yourself, while you're at it."

Allan thanked his father and pocketed the coin. "Mrs. Stauber'll still be at Mass," he suggested. "Say I get the paper now: breakfast won't be ready till she gets here." "Good idea." Blake Hartley nodded, pleased. "You'll have three-quarters of an hour, at least." * * * * * So far, he congratulated himself, everything had gone smoothly. Finishing his toilet, he went downstairs and onto the street, turning left at Brandon to Campbell, and left again in the direction of the station. Before he reached the underpass, a dozen half-forgotten memories had revived. Here was a house that would, in a few years, be gutted by fire. Here were four dwellings standing where he had last seen a five-story apartment building. A gasoline station and a weed-grown lot would shortly be replaced by a supermarket. The environs of the station itself were a complete puzzle to him, until he oriented himself.

He bought a New York Times, glancing first of all at the date line. Sunday, August 5, 1945: he'd estimated pretty closely. The battle of Okinawa had been won. The Potsdam Conference had just ended. There were still pictures of the B-25 crash against the Empire State Building, a week ago Saturday. And Japan was still being pounded by bombs from the air and shells from off-shore naval guns. Why, tomorrow, Hiroshima was due for the Big Job! It amused him to reflect that he was probably the only person in Williamsport who knew that.

On the way home, a boy, sitting on the top step of a front porch, hailed him. Allan replied cordially, trying to remember who it was. Of course: Larry

Morton! He and Allan had been buddies. They probably had been swimming, or playing Commandos and Germans, the afternoon before. Larry had gone to Cornell the same year that Allan had gone to Penn State: they had both graduated in 1954. Larry had gotten into some Government bureau, and then he had married a Pittsburgh girl, and had become twelfth vice-president of her father's firm. He had been killed, in 1968, in a plane crash.

"You gonna Sunday school?" Larry asked, mercifully unaware of the fate Allan foresaw for him.

"Why, no. I have some things I want to do at home." He'd have to watch himself. Larry would spot a difference quicker than any adult. "Heck with it," he added.

"Golly, I wisht I c'ld stay home from Sunday school whenever I wanted to," Larry envied. "How about us goin' swimmin', at the Canoe Club, 'safter?"

Allan thought fast. "Gee, I wisht I c'ld," he replied, lowering his grammatical sights. "I gotta stay home, 'safter. We're expectin' comp'ny: coupla aunts of mine. Dad wants me to stay home when they come."

That went over all right. Anybody knew that there was no rational accounting for the vagaries of the adult mind, and no appeal from adult demands. The prospect of company at the Hartley home would keep Larry away, that afternoon. He showed his disappointment.

"Aw, jeepers creepers!" he blasphemed euphemistically.

"Mebbe t'morrow," Allan said. "If I c'n make it. I gotta go, now: ain't had breakfast yet." He scuffed his feet boyishly, exchanged so-longs with his friend, and continued homeward.

* * * * *

As he had hoped, the Sunday paper kept his father occupied at breakfast, to the exclusion of any dangerous table talk. Blake Hartley was still deep in the financial section when Allan left the table and went to the library. There should be two books there to which he wanted badly to refer. For a while, he was afraid that his father had not acquired them prior to 1945, but he finally found them, and carried them onto the front porch, along with a pencil and a ruled yellow scratch pad. In his experienced future...or his past-to-come...Allan Hartley had been accustomed to doing his thinking with a pencil. As reporter, as novelist plotting his work, as amateur chemist in his home laboratory, as scientific warfare research officer, his ideas had always been clarified by making notes. He pushed a chair to the table and built up the seat with cushions, wondering how soon he would become used to the proportional disparity between himself and the furniture. As he opened the books and took his pencil in his hand, there was one thing missing. If he could only smoke a pipe, now!

His father came out and stretched in a wicker chair with the Times book-review section. The morning hours passed. Allan Hartley leafed through one book and then the other. His pencil moved rapidly at times: at others, he

doodled absently. There was no question, any more, in his mind, as to what or who he was. He was Allan Hartley, a man of forty-three, marooned in his own thirteen-year-old body, thirty years back in his own past. That was, of course, against all common sense, but he was easily able to ignore that objection. It had been made before: against the astronomy of Copernicus, and the geography of Columbus, and the biology of Darwin, and the industrial technology of Samuel Colt, and the military doctrines of Charles de Gaulle. Today's common sense had a habit of turning into tomorrow's utter nonsense. What he needed, right now, but bad, was a theory that would explain what had happened to him.

Understanding was beginning to dawn when Mrs. Stauber came out to announce midday dinner.

"I hope you von't mind haffin' it so early," she apologized. "Mein sister, Jennie, offer in Nippenose, she iss sick: I vant to go see her, dis afternoon, yet. I'll be back in blenty time to get supper, Mr. Hartley."

"Hey, Dad!" Allan spoke up. "Why can't we get our own supper, and have a picnic, like? That'd be fun, and Mrs. Stauber could stay as long as she wanted to."

His father looked at him. Such consideration for others was a most gratifying deviation from the juvenile norm: dawn of altruism, or something. He gave hearty assent:

"Why, of course, Mrs. Stauber. Allan and I can shift for ourselves, this evening: can't we, Allan? You needn't come back till tomorrow morning."

"Ach, t'ank you! T'ank you so mooch, Mr. Hartley."

At dinner, Allan got out from under the burden of conversation by questioning his father about the War and luring him into a lengthy dissertation on the difficulties of the forthcoming invasion of Japan. In view of what he remembered of the next twenty-four hours, Allan was secretly amused. His father was sure that the War would run on to mid1946.

After dinner, they returned to the porch, Hartley smoking a cigar and carrying out several law books. He only glanced at these occasionally: for the most part, he sat and blew smoke rings, and watched them float away. Some thrice-guilty felon was about to be triumphantly acquitted by a weeping jury: Allan could recognize a courtroom masterpiece in the process of incubation.

* * * * *

It was several hours later that the crunch of feet on the walk caused father and son to look up simultaneously. The approaching visitor was a tall man in a rumpled black suit: he had knobby wrists and big, awkward hands: black hair flecked with gray, and a harsh, bigoted face. Allan remembered him. Frank Gutchall. Lived on Campbell Street: a religious fanatic, and some sort of lay preacher. Maybe he needed legal advice: Allan could

vaguely remember some incident...

"Ah, good afternoon, Mr. Gutchall. Lovely day, isn't it?" Blake Hartley said.

Gutchall cleared his throat. "Mr. Hartley, I wonder if you could lend me a gun and some bullets," he began, embarrassedly. "My little dog's been hurt, and it's suffering something terrible. I want a gun, to put the poor thing out of its pain."

"Why, yes: of course. How would a 20-gauge shotgun do?" Blake Hartley asked. "You wouldn't want anything heavy."

Gutchall fidgeted. "Why, er, I was hoping you'd let me have a little gun." He held his hands about six inches apart. "A pistol, that I could put in my pocket. It wouldn't look right, to carry a hunting gun on the Lord's day: people wouldn't understand that it was for a work of mercy."

The lawyer nodded. In view of Gutchall's religious beliefs, the objection made sense.

"Well, I have a Colt .38-special," he said, "but you know, I belong to this Auxiliary Police outfit. If I were called out for duty, this evening, I'd need it. How soon could you bring it back?"

Something clicked in Allan Hartley's mind. He remembered, now, what that incident had been. He knew, too, what he had to do.

"Dad, aren't there some cartridges left for the Luger?" he asked.

Blake Hartley snapped his fingers. "By George, yes! I have a German automatic I can let you have, but I wish you'd bring it back as soon as possible. I'll get it for you."

Before he could rise, Allan was on his feet.

"Sit still, Dad: I'll get it. I know where the cartridges are." With that, he darted into the house and upstairs.

The Luger hung on the wall over his father's bed. Getting it down, he dismounted it, working with rapid precision. He used the blade of his pocketknife to unlock the endpiece of the breechblock, slipping out the firing pin and buttoning it into his shirt pocket. Then he reassembled the harmless pistol, and filled the clip with 9-millimeter cartridges from the bureau drawer.

There was an extension telephone beside the bed. Finding Gutchall's address in the directory, he lifted the telephone, and stretched his handkerchief over the mouthpiece. Then he dialed Police Headquarters.

"This is Blake Hartley," he lied, deepening his voice and copying his father's tone. "Frank Gutchall, who lives at...take this down"...he gave Gutchall's address..."has just borrowed a pistol from me, ostensibly to shoot a dog. He has no dog. He intends shooting his wife. Don't argue about how I know: there isn't time. E‡st take it for granted that I do. I disabled the pistol...took out the firing pin...but if he finds out what I did, he may get some other weapon. He's on his way home, but he's on foot. If you hurry, you may get a man there before he arrives, and grab him before he finds out the pistol won't shoot."

"O. K., Mr. Hartley. We'll take care of it. Thanks."

"And I wish you'd get my pistol back, as soon as you can. It's something I brought home from the other War, and I

shouldn't like to lose it."

"We'll take care of that, too. Thank you, Mr. Hartley."

He hung up, and carried the Luger and the loaded clip down to the porch.

* * * * *

"Look, Mr. Gutchall: here's how it works," he said, showing it to the visitor. Then he slapped in the clip and yanked up on the toggle loading the chamber. "It's ready to shoot, now: this is the safety." He pushed it on. "When you're ready to shoot, just shove it forward and up, and then pull the trigger. You have to pull the trigger each time: it's loaded for eight shots. And be sure to put the safety back when you're through shooting."

"Did you load the chamber?" Blake Hartley demanded.

"Sure. It's on safe, now."

"Let me see." His father took the pistol, being careful to keep his finger out of the trigger guard, and looked at it. "Yes, that's all right." He repeated the instructions Allan had given, stressing the importance of putting the safety on after using. "Understand how it works, now?" he asked.

"Yes, I understand how it works. Thank you, Mr. Hartley. Thank you, too, young man."

Gutchall put the Luger in his hip pocket, made sure it wouldn't fall out, and took his departure.

"You shouldn't have loaded it," Hartley reproved, when he was gone.

Allan sighed. This was it: the masquerade was over.

"I had to, to keep you from fooling with it," he said. "I didn't want you finding out that I'd taken out the firing pin."

"You what?"

"Gutchall didn't want that gun to shoot a dog. He has no dog. He meant to shoot his wife with it. He's a religious maniac: sees visions, hears voices, receives revelations, talks with the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost probably put him up to this caper. I'll submit that any man who holds long conversations with the Deity isn't to be trusted with a gun, and neither is any man who lies about why he wants one. And while I was at it, I called the police, on the upstairs phone. I had to use your name: I deepened my voice and talked through a handkerchief."

"You..." Blake Hartley jumped as though bee-stung. "Why did you have to do that?"

"You know why. I couldn't have told them, 'This is little Allan Hartley, just thirteen years old: please, Mr. Policeman, go and arrest Frank Gutchall before he goes root-toottoot at his wife with my pappa's Luger.' That would have gone over big, now, wouldn't it?"

"And suppose he really wants to shoot a dog: what sort of a mess will I be in?"

"No mess at all. If I'm wrong...which I'm not...I'll take the thump for it, myself. It'll pass for a dumb kid trick, and nothing'll be done. But if I'm right, you'll have to front for me. They'll keep your name out of it, but they'd give me a lot of cheap boy-hero publicity, which I don't want." He picked up his pencil

again. "We should have the complete returns in about twenty minutes."

* * * * *

That was a ten-minute under-estimate, and it was another quarter-hour before the detective-sergeant who returned the Luger had finished congratulating Blake Hartley and giving him the thanks of the Department. After he had gone, the lawyer picked up the Luger, withdrew the clip, and ejected the round in the chamber.

"Well," he told his son, "you were right. You saved that woman's life." He looked at the automatic, and then handed it across the table. "Now, let's see you put that firing pin back."

Allan Hartley dismantled the weapon, inserted the missing part, and put it together again, then snapped it experimentally and returned it to his father. Blake Hartley looked at it again, and laid it on the table.

"Now, son, suppose we have a little talk," he said softly.

"But I explained everything." Allan objected innocently.

"You did not," his father retorted. "Yesterday you'd never have thought of a trick like this: why, you wouldn't even have known how to take this pistol apart. And at dinner, I caught you using language and expressing ideas that were entirely outside anything you'd ever known before. Now, I want to know...and I mean this literally."

Allan chuckled. "I hope you're not toying with the rather medieval notion of obsession," he said.

Blake Hartley started. Something very like that must have been flitting through his mind. He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it abruptly.

"The trouble is, I'm not sure you aren't right," his son continued. "You say you find me...changed. When did you first notice a difference?"

"Last night, you were still my little boy. This morning..." Blake Hartley was talking more to himself than to Allan. "I don't know. You were unusually silent at breakfast. And come to think of it, there was something ... something strange ... about you when I saw you in the hall, upstairs.... Allan!" he burst out, vehemently. "What has happened to you?"

Allan Hartley felt a twinge of pain. What his father was going through was almost what he, himself, had endured, in the first few minutes after waking.

"I wish I could be sure, myself, Dad," he said. "You see, when I woke, this morning, I hadn't the least recollection of anything I'd done yesterday. August 4, 1945, that is," he specified. "I was positively convinced that I was a man of forty-three, and my last memory was of lying on a stretcher, injured by a bomb explosion. And I was equally convinced that this had happened in 1975."

"Huh?" His father straightened. "Did you say nineteen seventy-five?" He thought for a moment. "That's right: in 1975, you will be forty-three. A bomb, you say?"

Allan nodded. "During the siege of Buffalo, in the Third World War," he said, "I was a captadŸ in G5...Scientific Warfare, General Staff. There'd been a

transpolar air invasion of Canada, and I'd been sent to the front to check on service failures of a new lubricating oil for combat equipment. A week after I got there, Ottawa fell, and the retreat started. We made a stand at Buffalo, and that was where I copped it. I remember being picked up, and getting a narcotic injection. The next thing I knew, I was in bed, upstairs, and it was 1945 again, and I was back in my own little thirteen-year-old body."

"Oh, Allan, you just had a nightmare to end nightmares!" his father assured him, laughing a trifle too heartily. "That's all!"

"That was one of the first things I thought of. I had to reject it: it just wouldn't fit the facts. Look: a normal dream is part of the dreamer's own physical brain, isn't it? Well, here is a part about two thousand per cent greater than the whole from which it was taken. Which is absurd."

"You mean all this Battle of Buffalo stuff? That's easy. All the radio commentators have been harping on the horrors of World War III, and you couldn't have avoided hearing some of it. You just have an undigested chunk of H. V. Kaltenborn raising hell in your subconscious."

"It wasn't just World War III: it was everything. My four years at high school, and my four years at Penn State, and my seven years as a reporter on the Philadelphia Record. And my novels: 'Children of the Mist,' 'Rose of Death,' 'Conqueror's Road.' They were no kid stuff. Why, yesterday I'd never even have thought of some of the ideas I used in my detective stories, that I published under a nom-de-plume. And my hobby, chemistry: I was pretty good at that. Patented a couple of processes that made me as much money as my writing. You think a thirteen-year-old just dreamed all that up? Or, here: you speak French, don't you?" He switched languages and spoke at some length in good conversational slang-spiced Parisian. "Too bad you don't speak Spanish, too," he added, reverting to English. "Except for a Mexican accent you could cut with a machete, I'm even better there than in French. And I know some German, and a little Russian."

* * * * *

Blake Hartley was staring at his son, stunned. It was some time before he could make himself speak.

"I could barely keep up with you, in French," he admitted. "I can swear that in the last thirteen years of your life, you had absolutely no chance to learn it. All right: you lived till 1975, you say. Then, all of a sudden, you found yourself back here, thirteen years old, in 1945. I suppose you remember everything in between?" he asked. "Did you ever read James Branch Cabell? Remember Florian de Puysange, in 'The High Place'?"

"Yes. You find the same idea in 'Jurgen' too," Allan said. "You know, I'm beginning to wonder if Cabell mightn't have known something he didn't want to write."

"But it's impossible!" Blake Hartley hit the table with his hand, so hard that

the heavy pistol bounced. The loose round he had ejected from the chamber toppled over and started to roll, falling off the edge. He stooped and picked it up. "How can you go back, against time? And the time you claim you came from doesn't exist, now: it hasn't happened yet." He reached for the pistol magazine, to insert the cartridge, and as he did, he saw the books in front of his son. "Dunne's 'Experiment with Time,'" he commented. "And J. N. M. Tyrrell's 'Science and Psychical Phenomena.' Are you trying to work out a theory?"

"Yes." It encouraged Allan to see that his father had unconsciously adopted an adult-to-adult manner. "I think I'm getting somewhere, too. You've read these books? Well, look, Dad: what's your attitude on precognition? The ability of the human mind to exhibit real knowledge, apart from logical inference, of future events? You think Dunne is telling the truth about his experiences? Or that the cases in Tyrrell's book are properly verified, and can't be explained away on the basis of chance?"

Blake Hartley frowned. "I don't know," he confessed. "The evidence is the sort that any court in the world would accept, if it concerned ordinary, normal events. Especially the cases investigated by the Society for Psychical Research: they have been verified. But how can anybody know of something that hasn't happened yet? If it hasn't happened yet, it doesn't exist, and you can't have real knowledge of something that has no real existence."

"Tyrrell discusses that dilemma, and doesn't dispose of it. I think I can. If somebody has real knowledge of the future, then the future must be available to the present mind. And if any moment other than the bare present exists, then all time must be totally present: every moment must be perpetually coexistent with every other moment," Allan said.

"Yes. I think I see what you mean. That was Dunne's idea, wasn't it?"

"No. Dunne postulated an infinite series of time dimensions, the entire extent of each being the bare present moment of the next. What I'm postulating is the perpetual coexistence of every moment of time in this dimension, just as every graduation on a yardstick exists equally with every other graduation, but each at a different point in space."

"Well, as far as duration and sequence go, that's all right," the father agreed. "But how about the 'Passage of Time'?"

"Well, time does appear to pass. So does the landscape you see from a moving car window. I'll suggest that both are illusions of the same kind. We imagine time to be dynamic, because we've never viewed it from a fixed point, but if it is totally present, then it must be static, and in that case, we're moving through time."

"That seems all right. But what's your car window?"

"If all time is totally present, then you must exist simultaneously at every moment along your individual life span," Allan said. "Your physical body, and your mind, and all the thoughts contained in your mind, each at its appropriate moment in sequence. But what is

it that exists only at the bare moment we think of as now?"

* * * * *

Blake Hartley grinned. Already, he was accepting his small son as an intellectual equal.

"Please, teacher: what?"

"Your consciousness. And don't say, 'What's that?' Teacher doesn't know. But we're only conscious of one moment: the illusory now. This is 'now,' and it was 'now' when you asked that question, and it'll be 'now' when I stop talking, but each is a different moment. We imagine that all those nows are rushing past us. Really, they're standing still, and our consciousness is whizzing past them."

His father thought that over for some time. Then he sat up. "Hey!" he cried, suddenly. "If some part of our ego is time-free and passes from moment to moment, it must be extraphysical, because the physical body exists at every moment through which the consciousness passes. And if it's extraphysical, there's no reason whatever for assuming that it passes out of existence when it reaches the moment of the death of the body. Why, there's logical evidence for survival, independent of any alleged spirit communication! You can toss out Patience Worth, and Mrs. Osborne Leonard's Feda, and Sir Oliver Lodge's son, and Wilfred Brandon, and all the other spirit-communicators, and you still have evidence."

"I hadn't thought of that," Allan confessed. "I think you're right. Well, let's put that at the bottom of the agenda and get on with this time business. You 'lose consciousness' as in sleep: where does your consciousness go? I think it simply detaches from the moment at which you go to sleep, and moves backward or forward along the line of moment-sequence, to some prior or subsequent moment, attaching there."

"Well, why don't we know anything about that?" Blake Hartley asked. "It never seems to happen. We go to sleep tonight, and it's always tomorrow morning when we wake: never day-before-yesterday, or last month, or next year."

"It never ... or almost never ... seems to happen: you're right there. Know why? Because if the consciousness goes forward, it attaches at a moment when the physical brain contains memories of the previous, consciously unexperienced, moment. You wake, remembering the evening before, because that's the memory contained in your mind at that moment, and back of it are memories of all the events in the interim. See?"

"Yes. But how about backward movement, like this experience of yours?"

"This experience of mine may not be unique, but I never heard of another case like it. What usually happens is that the memories carried back by the consciousness are buried in the subconscious mind. You know how thick the wall between the subconscious and the conscious mind is. These dreams of Dunne's, and the cases in Tyrrell's book, are leakage. That's why precognitions are usually incomplete and distorted, and generally trivial. The wonder isn't that good cases are so few: it's surpris-

ing that there are any at all." Allan looked at the papers in front of him. "I haven't begun to theorize about how I managed to remember everything. It may have been the radiations from the bomb, or the effect of the narcotic, or both together, or something at this end, or a combination of all three. But the fact remains that my subconscious barrier didn't function, and everything got through. So, you see, I am obsessed...by my own future identity."

"And I'd been afraid that you'd been, well, taken-over by some ... some outsider." Blake Hartley grinned weakly. "I don't mind admitting, Allan, that what's happened has been a shock. But that other ... I just couldn't have taken that."

* * * * *

"No. Not and stayed sane. But really, I am your son: the same entity I was yesterday. I've just had what you might call an educational short cut."

"I'll say you have!" His father laughed in real amusement. He discovered that his cigar had gone out, and re-lit it. "Here: if you can remember the next thirty years, suppose you tell me when the War's going to end. This one, I mean."

"The Japanese surrender will be announced at exactly 1901...7:01 P. M. present style... on August 14. A week from Tuesday. Better make sure we have plenty of grub in the house by then. Everything will be closed up tight till Thursday morning: even the restaurants. I remember, we had nothing to eat in the house but some scraps."

"Well! It is handy, having a prophet in the family! I'll see to it Mrs. Stauber gets plenty of groceries in.... Tuesday a week? That's pretty sudden, isn't it?"

"The Japs are going to think so," Allan replied. He went on to describe what was going to happen.

His father swore softly. "You know, I've heard talk about atomic energy, but I thought it was just Buck Rogers stuff. Was that the sort of bomb that got you?"

"That was a firecracker to the bomb that got me. That thing exploded a good ten miles away."

Blake Hartley whistled softly. "And that's going to happen in thirty years! You know, son, if I were you, I wouldn't like to have to know about a thing like that." He looked at Allan for a moment. "Please, if you know, don't ever tell me when I'm going to die."

Allan smiled. "I can't. I had a letter from you just before I left for the front. You were seventy-eight, then, and you were still hunting, and fishing, and flying your own plane. But I'm not going to get killed in any Battle of Buffalo, this time, and if I can prevent it, and I think I can, there won't be any World War III."

"But...You say all time exists, perpetually coexistent and totally present," his father said. "Then it's right there in front of you, and you're getting closer to it, every watch tick."

Allan Hartley shook his head. "You know what I remembered, when Frank Gutchall came to borrow a gun?" he asked. "Well, the other time, I hadn't been home: I'd been swimming at the Canoe Club, with Larry Morton. When I got home, about half an hour from now,

I found the house full of cops. Gutchall talked the .38 officers' model out of you, and gone home: he'd shot his wife four times through the body, finished her off with another one back of the ear, and then used his sixth shot to blast his brains out. The cops traced the gun: they took a very poor view of your lending it to him. You never got it back."

"Trust that gang to keep a good gun," the lawyer said.

"I didn't want us to lose it, this time, and I didn't want to see you lose face around City Hall. Gutchalls, of course, are expendable," Allan said. "But my main reason for fixing Frank Gutchall up with a padded cell was that I wanted to know whether or not the future could be altered. I have it on experimental authority that it can be. There must be additional dimensions of time: lines of alternate probabilities. Something like William Seabrook's witch-doctor friend's Fan-Shaped Destiny. When I brought memories of the future back to the present, I added certain factors to the causal chain. That set up an entirely new line of probabilities. On no notice at all, I stopped a murder and a suicide. With thirty years to work, I can stop a world war. I'll have the means to do it, too."

"The means?"

"Unlimited wealth and influence. Here." Allan picked up a sheet and handed it to his father. "Used properly, we can make two or three million on that, alone. A list of all the Kentucky Derby, Preakness, and Belmont winners to 1970. That'll furnish us primary capital. Then, remember, I was something of a chemist. I took it up, originally, to get background material for one of my detective stories: it fascinated me, and I made it a hobby, and then a source of income. I'm thirty years ahead of any chemist in the world, now. You remember I. G. Farbenindustrie? Ten years from now, we'll make them look like pikers."

His father looked at the yellow sheet. "Assault, at eight to one," he said. "I can scrape up about five thousand for that...Yes: in ten years...Any other little operations you have in mind?" he asked.

"About 1950, we start building a political organization, here in Pennsylvania. In 1960, I think we can elect you President. The world situation will be crucial, by that time, and we had a good-natured nonentity in the White House then, who let things go till war became inevitable. I think President Hartley can be trusted to take a strong line of policy. In the meantime, you can read Machiavelli."

"That's my little boy, talking!"

Blake Hartley said softly. "All right, son: I'll do just what you tell me, and when you grow up, I'll be president.... Let's go get supper, now."

Black Amazon of Mars

Grimly Eric John Stark slogged toward that ancient Martian city: with every step he cursed the talisman of Ban Cruach that flamed in his blood-stained belt. Behind him screamed the hordes of

Ciaran, hungering for that magic jewel: ahead lay the dread abode of the Ice Creatures: at his side stalked the whispering spectre of Ban Cruach, urging him on to a battle Stark knew he must lose!

Through all the long cold hours of the Norland night the Martian had not moved nor spoken. At dusk of the day before Eric John Stark had brought him into the ruined tower and laid him down, wrapped in blankets, on the snow. He had built a fire of dead brush, and since then the two men had waited, alone in the vast wasteland that girdles the polar cap of Mars.

Now, just before dawn, Camar the Martian spoke.

"Stark."

"Yes?"

"I am dying."

"Yes."

"I will not reach Kushat."

"No."

Camar nodded. He was silent again.

The wind howled down from the northern ice, and the broken walls rose up against it, brooding, gigantic, roofless now but so huge and sprawling that they seemed less like walls than cliffs of ebon stone. Stark would not have gone near them but for Camar. They were wrong, somehow, with a taint of forgotten evil still about them.

The big Earthman glanced at Camar, and his face was sad. "A man likes to die in his own place," he said abruptly. "I am sorry."

"The Lord of Silence is a great personage," Camar answered. "He does not mind the meeting place. No. It was not for that I came back into the Norlands."

He was shaken by an agony that was not of the body. "And I shall not reach Kushat!"

Stark spoke quietly, using the courtly High Martian almost as fluently as Camar.

"I have known that there was a burden heavier than death upon my brother's soul."

He leaned over, placing one large hand on the Martian's shoulder. "My brother has given his life for mine. Therefore, I will take his burden upon myself, if I can."

He did not want Camar's burden, whatever it might be. But the Martian had fought beside him through a long guerilla campaign among the harried tribes of the nearer moon. He was a good man of his hands, and in the end had taken the bullet that was meant for Stark, knowing quite well what he was doing. They were friends.

That was why Stark had brought Camar into the bleak north country, trying to reach the city of his birth. The Martian was driven by some secret demon. He was afraid to die before he reached Kushat.

And now he had no choice.

"I have sinned, Stark. I have stolen a holy thing. You're an outlander, you would not know of Ban Cruach, and the talisman that he left when he went away forever beyond the Gates of Death."

Camar flung aside the blankets and sat up, his voice gaining a febrile

strength.

"I was born and bred in the Thieves' Quarter under the Wall. I was proud of my skill. And the talisman was a challenge. It was a treasured thing: so treasured that hardly a man has touched it since the days of Ban Cruach who made it. And that was in the days when men still had the lustre on them, before they forgot that they were gods.

"Guard well the Gates of Death,' he said, "—that is the city's trust. And keep the talisman always, for the day may come when you will need its strength. Who holds Kushat holds Mars: and the talisman will keep the city safe.'

"I was a thief, and proud. And I stole the talisman."

His hands went to his girdle, a belt of worn leather with a boss of battered steel. But his fingers were already numb.

"Take it, Stark. Open the boss: there, on the side, where the beast's head is carved...."

* * * * *

Stark took the belt from Camar and found the hidden spring. The rounded top of the boss came free. Inside it was something wrapped in a scrap of silk.

"I had to leave Kushat," Camar whispered. "I could never go back. But it was enough: to have taken that."

He watched, shaken between awe and pride and remorse, as Stark unwrapped the bit of silk.

Stark had discounted most of Camar's talk as superstition, but even so he had expected something more spectacular than the object he held in his palm.

It was a lens, some four inches across: man-made, and made with great skill, but still only a bit of crystal. Turning it about, Stark saw that it was not a simple lens, but an intricate interlocking of many facets. Incredibly complicated, hypnotic if one looked at it too long.

"What is its use?" he asked of Camar.

"We are as children. We have forgotten. But there is a legend, a belief: that Ban Cruach himself made the talisman as a sign that he would not forget us, and would come back when Kushat is threatened. Back through the Gates of Death, to teach us again the power that was his!"

"I do not understand," said Stark. "What are the Gates of Death?"

Camar answered, "It is a pass that opens into the black mountains beyond Kushat. The city stands guard before it: why, no man remembers, except that it is a great trust."

His gaze feasted on the talisman.

Stark said, "You wish me to take this to Kushat?"

"Yes. Yes! And yet...." Camar looked at Stark, his eyes filling suddenly with tears. "No. The North is not used to strangers. With me, you might have been safe. But alone.... No, Stark. You have risked too much already. Go back, out of the Norlands, while you can."

He lay back on the blankets. Stark saw that a bluish pallor had come into the hollows of his cheeks.

"Camar," he said. And again, "Camar!"

"Yes?"

"Go in peace, Camar. I will take the talisman to Kushat."

The Martian sighed, and smiled, and Stark was glad that he had made the promise.

"The riders of Mekh are wolves," said Camar suddenly. "They hunt these gorges. Look out for them."

"I will."

Stark's knowledge of the geography of this part of Mars was vague indeed, but he knew that the mountain valleys of Mekh lay ahead and to the north, between him and Kushat. Camar had told him of these upland warriors. He was willing to heed the warning.

Camar had done with talking. Stark knew that he had not long to wait. The wind spoke with the voice of a great organ. The moons had set and it was very dark outside the tower, except for the white glimmering of the snow. Stark looked up at the brooding walls, and shivered. There was a smell of death already in the air.

To keep from thinking, he bent closer to the fire, studying the lens. There were scratches on the bezel, as though it had been held sometime in a clamp, or setting, like a jewel. An ornament, probably, worn as a badge of rank. Strange ornament for a barbarian king, in the dawn of Mars. The firelight made tiny dancing sparks in the endless inner facets. Quite suddenly, he had a curious feeling that the thing was alive.

A pang of primitive and unreasoning fear shot through him, and he fought it down. His vision was beginning to blur, and he shut his eyes, and in the darkness it seemed to him that he could see and hear....

* * * * *

He started up, shaken now with an eerie terror, and raised his hand to hurl the talisman away. But the part of him that had learned with much pain and effort to be civilized made him stop, and think.

He sat down again. An instrument of hypnosis? Possibly. And yet that fleeting touch of sight and sound had not been his own, out of his own memories.

He was tempted now, fascinated, like a child that plays with fire. The talisman had been worn somehow. Where? On the breast? On the brow?

He tried the first, with no result. Then he touched the flat surface of the lens to his forehead.

The great tower of stone rose up monstrous to the sky. It was whole, and there were pallid lights within that stirred and flickered, and it was crowned with a shimmering darkness.

He lay outside the tower, on his belly, and he was filled with fear and a great anger,

and a loathing such as turns the bones to water. There was no snow. There was ice everywhere, rising to half the tower's height, sheathing the ground.

Ice. Cold and clear and beautiful... and deadly.

He moved. He glided snakelike, with infinite caution, over the smooth surface. The tower was gone, and far below him was a city. He saw the temples and the palaces, the glittering

lovely city beneath him in the ice, blurred and fairylike and strange, a dream half glimpsed through crystal.

He saw the Ones that lived there, moving slowly through the streets. He could not see them clearly, only the vague shining of their bodies, and he was glad.

He hated them, with a hatred that conquered even his fear, which was great indeed.

He was not Eric John Stark. He was Ban Cruach.

The tower and the city vanished, swept away on a reeling tide.

He stood beneath a scarp of black rock, notched with a single pass. The cliffs hung over him, leaning out their vast bulk as though to crush him, and the narrow mouth of the pass was full of evil laughter where the wind went by.

He began to walk forward, into the pass. He was quite alone.

The light was dim and strange at the bottom of that cleft. Little veils of mist crept and clung between the ice and the rock, thickened, became more dense as he went farther and farther into the pass. He could not see, and the wind spoke with many tongues, piping in the crevices of the cliffs.

All at once there was a shadow in the mist before him, a dim gigantic shape that moved toward him, and he knew that he looked at death. He cried out....

It was Stark who yelled in blind atavistic fear, and the echo of his own cry brought him up standing, shaking in every limb. He had dropped the talisman. It lay gleaming in the snow at his feet, and the alien memories were gone: and Camar was dead.

After a time he crouched down, breathing harshly. He did not want to touch the lens again. The part of him that had learned to fear strange gods and evil spirits with every step he took, the primitive aboriginal that lay so close under the surface of his mind, warned him to leave it, to run away, to desert this place of death and ruined stone.

He forced himself to take it up. He did not look at it. He wrapped it in the bit of silk and replaced it inside the iron boss, and clasped the belt around his waist. Then he found the small flask that lay with his gear beside the fire and took a long pull, and tried to think rationally of the thing that had happened.

Memories. Not his own, but the memories of Ban Cruach, a million years ago in the morning of a world. Memories of hate, a secret war against unhuman beings that dwelt in crystal cities cut in the living ice, and used these ruined towers for some dark purpose of their own.

Was that the meaning of the talisman, the power that lay within it? Had Ban Cruach, by some elder and forgotten science, imprisoned the echoes of his own mind in the crystal?

Why? Perhaps as a warning, as a reminder of ageless, alien danger beyond the Gates of Death?

Suddenly one of the beasts tethered outside the ruined tower started up from its sleep with a hissing snarl.

Instantly Stark became motionless.

They came silently on their padded

feet, the rangy mountain brutes moving daintily through the sprawling ruin. Their riders too were silent: tall men with fierce eyes and russet hair, wearing leather coats and carrying each a long, straight spear.

There were a score of them around the tower in the windy gloom. Stark did not bother to draw his gun. He had learned very young the difference between courage and idiocy.

He walked out toward them, slowly lest one of them be startled into spearing him, yet not slowly enough to denote fear. And he held up his right hand and gave them greeting.

They did not answer him. They sat their restive mounts and stared at him, and Stark knew that Camar had spoken the truth. These were the riders of Mekh, and they were wolves.

Stark waited, until they should tire of their own silence.

Finally one demanded, "Of what country are you?"

He answered, "I am called N'Chaka, the Man-Without-a-Tribe."

It was the name they had given him, the half-human aboriginals who had raised him in the blaze and thunder and bitter frosts of Mercury.

"A stranger," said the leader, and smiled. He pointed at the dead Camar and asked, "Did you slay him?"

"He was my friend," said Stark, "I was bringing him home to die."

Two riders dismounted to inspect the body. One called up to the leader, "He was from Kushat, if I know the breed, Thord! And he has not been robbed." He proceeded to take care of that detail himself.

"A stranger," repeated the leader, Thord. "Bound for Kushat, with a man of Kushat. Well. I think you will come with us, stranger."

Stark shrugged. And with the long spears pricking him, he did not resist when the tall Thord plundered him of all he owned except his clothes: and Camar's belt, which was not worth the stealing. His gun Thord flung contemptuously away.

One of the men brought Stark's beast and Camar's from where they were tethered, and the Earthman mounted: as usual, over the violent protest of the creature, which did not like the smell of him. They moved out from under the shelter of the walls, into the full fury of the wind.

For the rest of that night, and through the next day and the night that followed it they rode eastward, stopping only to rest the beasts and chew on their rations of jerked meat.

To Stark, riding a prisoner, it came with full force that this was the North country, half a world away from the Mars of spaceships and commerce and visitors from other planets. The future had never touched these wild mountains and barren plains. The past held pride enough.

To the north, the horizon showed a strange and ghostly glimmer where the barrier wall of the polar pack reared up, gigantic against the sky. The wind blew, down from the ice, through the mountain gorges, across the plains, never

ceasing. And here and there the cryptic towers rose, broken monoliths of stone. Stark remembered the vision of the talisman, the huge structure crowned with eerie darkness. He looked upon the ruins with loathing and curiosity. The men of Mekh could tell him nothing.

Thord did not tell Stark where they were taking him, and Stark did not ask. It would have been an admission of fear.

In mid-afternoon of the second day they came to a lip of rock where the snow was swept clean, and below it was a sheer drop into a narrow valley. Looking down, Stark saw that on the floor of the valley, up and down as far as he could see, were men and beasts and shelters of hide and brush, and fires burning. By the hundreds, by the several thousand, they camped under the cliffs, and their voices rose up on the thin air in a vast deep murmur that was deafening after the silence of the plains.

A war party, gathered now, before the thaw. Stark smiled. He became curious to meet the leader of this army.

They found their way single file along a winding track that dropped down the cliff face. The wind stopped abruptly, cut off by the valley walls. They came in among the shelters of the camp.

Here the snow was churned and soiled and melted to slush by the fires. There were no women in the camp, no sign of the usual cheerful rabble that follows a barbarian army. There were only men: hillmen and warriors all, tough-handed killers with no thought but battle.

They came out of their holes to shout at Thord and his men, and stare at the stranger. Thord was flushed and jovial with importance.

"I have no time for you," he shouted back. "I go to speak with the Lord Ciaran."

Stark rode impassively, a dark giant with a face of stone. From time to time he made his beast curvet, and laughed at himself inwardly for doing it.

They came at length to a shelter larger than the others, but built exactly the same and no more comfortable. A spear was thrust into the snow beside the entrance, and from it hung a black pennant with a single bar of silver across it, like lightning in a night sky. Beside it was a shield with the same device. There were no guards.

Thord dismounted, bidding Stark to do the same. He hammered on the shield with the hilt of his sword, announcing himself.

"Lord Ciaran! It is Thord; with a captive."

A voice, toneless and strangely muffled, spoke from within.

"Enter, Thord."

Thord pushed aside the hide curtain and went in, with Stark at his heels.

* * * * *

The dim daylight did not penetrate the interior. Cressets burned, giving off a flickering brilliance and a smell of strong oil. The floor of packed snow was carpeted with furs, much worn. Otherwise there was no adornment, and no furniture but a chair and a table, both

dark with age and use, and a pallet of skins in one shadowy corner with what seemed to be a heap of rags upon it.

In the chair sat a man.

He seemed very tall, in the shaking light of the cressets. From neck to thigh his lean body was cased in black link mail, and under that a tunic of leather, dyed black. Across his knees he held a sable axe, a great thing made for the shearing of skulls, and his hands lay upon it gently, as though it were a toy he loved.

His head and face were covered by a thing that Stark had seen before only in very old paintings: the ancient war-mask of the inland Kings of Mars. Wrought of black and gleaming steel, it presented an unhuman visage of slitted eyeholes and a barred slot for breathing. Behind, it sprang out in a thin, soaring sweep, like a dark wing edge-on in flight.

The intent, expressionless scrutiny of that mask was bent, not upon Thord, but upon Eric John Stark.

The hollow voice spoke again, from behind the mask. "Well?"

"We were hunting in the gorges to the south," said Thord. "We saw a fire...." He told the story, of how they had found the stranger and the body of the man from Kushat.

"Kushat!" said the Lord Ciaran softly. "Ah! And why, stranger, were you going to Kushat?"

"My name is Stark. Eric John Stark, Earthman, out of Mercury." He was tired of being called stranger. Quite suddenly, he was tired of the whole business.

"Why should I not go to Kushat? Is it against some law, that a man may not go there in peace without being hounded all over the Norlands? And why do the men of Mekh make it their business? They have nothing to do with the city."

Thord held his breath, watching with delighted anticipation.

The hands of the man in armor caressed the axe. They were slender hands, smooth and sinewy: small hands, it seemed, for such a weapon.

"We make what we will our business, Eric John Stark." He spoke with a peculiar gentleness. "I have asked you. Why were you going to Kushat?"

"Because," Stark answered with equal restraint, "my comrade wanted to go home to die."

"It seems a long, hard journey, just for dying." The black helm bent forward, in an attitude of thought. "Only the condemned or banished leave their cities, or their clans. Why did your comrade flee Kushat?"

A voice spoke suddenly from out of the heap of rags that lay on the pallet in the shadows of the corner. A man's voice, deep and husky, with the harsh quaver of age or madness in it.

"Three men beside myself have fled Kushat, over the years that matter. One died in the spring floods. One was caught in the moving ice of winter. One lived. A thief named Camar, who stole a certain talisman."

Stark said, "My comrade was called Greshi." The leather belt weighed heavy about him, and the iron boss

seemed hot against his belly. He was beginning, now, to be afraid.

* * * * *

The Lord Ciaran spoke, ignoring Stark. "It was the sacred talisman of Kushat. Without it, the city is like a man without a soul."

As the Veil of Tanit was to Carthage, Stark thought, and reflected on the fate of that city after the Veil was stolen.

"The nobles were afraid of their own people," the man in armor said. "They did not dare to tell that it was gone. But we know."

"And," said Stark, "you will attack Kushat before the thaw, when they least expect you."

"You have a sharp mind, stranger. Yes. But the great wall will be hard to carry, even so. If I came, bearing in my hands the talisman of Ban Cruach...."

He did not finish, but turned instead to Thord. "When you plundered the dead man's body, what did you find?"

"Nothing, Lord. A few coins, a knife, hardly worth the taking."

"And you, Eric John Stark. What did you take from the body?"

With perfect truth he answered, "Nothing."

"Thord," said the Lord Ciaran, "search him."

Thord came smiling up to Stark and ripped his jacket open.

With uncanny swiftness, the Earthman moved. The edge of one broad hand took Thord under the ear, and before the man's knees had time to sag Stark had caught his arm. He turned, crouching forward, and pitched Thord headlong through the door flap.

He straightened and turned again. His eyes held a feral glint. "The man has robbed me once," he said. "It is enough."

He heard Thord's men coming. Three of them tried to jam through the entrance at once, and he sprang at them. He made no sound. His fists did the talking for him, and then his feet, as he kicked the stunned barbarians back upon their leader.

"Now," he said to the Lord Ciaran, "will we talk as men?"

The man in armor laughed, a sound of pure enjoyment. It seemed that the gaze behind the mask studied Stark's savage face, and then lifted to greet the sullen Thord who came back into the shelter, his cheeks flushed crimson with rage.

"Go," said the Lord Ciaran. "The stranger and I will talk."

"But Lord," he protested, glaring at Stark, "it is not safe...."

"My dark mistress looks after my safety," said Ciaran, stroking the axe across his knees. "Go."

Thord went.

The man in armor was silent then, the blind mask turned to Stark, who met that eyeless gaze and was silent also. And the bundle of rags in the shadows straightened slowly and became a tall old man with rusty hair and beard, through which peered craggy juts of bone and two bright, small points of fire, as though some wicked flame burned within him.

He shuffled over and crouched at the

feet of the Lord Ciaran, watching the Earthman. And the man in armor leaned forward.

"I will tell you something, Eric John Stark. I am a bastard, but I come of the blood of kings. My name and rank I must make with my own hands. But I will set them high, and my name will ring in the Norlands!

"I will take Kushat. Who holds Kushat, holds Mars: and the power and the riches that lie beyond the Gates of Death!"

"I have seen them," said the old man, and his eyes blazed. "I have seen Ban Cruach the mighty. I have seen the temples and the palaces glitter in the ice. I have seen Them, the shining ones. Oh, I have seen them, the beautiful, hideous ones!"

He glanced sidelong at Stark, very cunning. "That is why Otar is mad, stranger. He has seen."

A chill swept Stark. He too had seen, not with his own eyes but with the mind and memories of Ban Cruach, of a million years ago.

Then it had been no illusion, the fantastic vision opened to him by the talisman now hidden in his belt! If this old madman had seen....

"What beings lurk beyond the Gates of Death I do not know," said Ciaran. "But my dark mistress will test their strength: and I think my red wolves will hunt them down, once they get a smell of plunder."

"The beautiful, terrible ones," whispered Otar. "And oh, the temples and the palaces, and the great towers of stone!"

"Ride with me, Stark," said the Lord Ciaran abruptly. "Yield up the talisman, and be the shield at my back. I have offered no other man that honor."

Stark asked slowly, "Why do you choose me?"

"We are of one blood, Stark, though we be strangers."

The Earthman's cold eyes narrowed. "What would your red wolves say to that? And what would Otar say? Look at him, already stiff with jealousy, and fear lest I answer, —Yes'."

"I do not think you would be afraid of either of them."

"On the contrary," said Stark, "I am a prudent man." He paused. "There is one other thing. I will bargain with no man until I have looked into his eyes. Take off your helm, Ciaran: and then perhaps we will talk!"

Otar's breath made a snakelike hissing between his toothless gums, and the hands of the Lord Ciaran tightened on the haft of the axe.

"No!" he whispered. "That I can never do."

Otar rose to his feet, and for the first time Stark felt the full strength that lay in this strange old man.

"Would you look upon the face of destruction?" he thundered. "Do you ask for death? Do you think a thing is hidden behind a mask of steel without a reason, that you demand to see it?"

He turned. "My Lord," he said. "By tomorrow the last of the clans will have joined us. After that, we must march. Give this Earthman to Thord, for the time that remains: and you will have the tal-

isman."

The blank, blind mask was unmoving, turned toward Stark, and the Earthman thought that from behind it came a faint sound that might have been a sigh.

Then....

"Thord!" cried the Lord Ciaran, and lifted up the axe.

The flames leaped high from the fire in the windless gorge. Men sat around it in a great circle, the wild riders out of the mountain valleys of Mekh. They sat with the curbed and shivering eagerness of wolves around a dying quarry. Now and again their white teeth showed in a kind of silent laughter, and their eyes watched.

"He is strong," they whispered, one to the other. "He will live the night out, surely!"

On an outcrop of rock sat the Lord Ciaran, wrapped in a black cloak, holding the great axe in the crook of his arm. Beside him, Otar huddled in the snow.

Close by, the long spears had been driven deep and lashed together to make a scaffolding, and upon this frame was hung a man. A big man, iron-muscled and very lean, the bulk of his shoulders filling the space between the bending shafts. Eric John Stark of Earth, out of Mercury.

He had already been scourged without mercy. He sagged of his own weight between the spears, breathing in harsh sobs, and the trampled snow around him was spotted red.

Thord was wielding the lash. He had stripped off his own coat, and his body glistened with sweat in spite of the cold. He cut his victim with great care, making the long lash sing and crack. He was proud of his skill.

Stark did not cry out.

Presently Thord stepped back, panting, and looked at the Lord Ciaran. And the black helm nodded.

Thord dropped the whip. He went up to the big dark man and lifted his head by the hair.

"Stark," he said, and shook the head roughly. "Stranger!"

Eyes opened and stared at him, and Thord could not repress a slight shiver. It seemed that the pain and indignity had wrought some evil magic on this man he had ridden with, and thought he knew. He had seen exactly the same gaze in a big snow-cat caught in a trap, and he felt suddenly that it was not a man he spoke to, but a predatory beast.

"Stark," he said. "Where is the talisman of Ban Cruach?"

The Earthman did not answer.

Thord laughed. He glanced up at the sky, where the moons rode low and swift.

"The night is only half gone. Do you think you can last it out?"

The cold, cruel, patient eyes watched Thord. There was no reply.

Some quality of pride in that gaze angered the barbarian. It seemed to mock him, who was so sure of his ability to loosen a reluctant tongue.

"You think I cannot make you talk, don't you? You don't know me, stranger! You don't know Thord, who can make

the rocks speak out if he will!"

He reached out with his free hand and struck Stark across the face.

It seemed impossible that anything so still could move so quickly. There was an ugly flash of teeth, and Thord's wrist was caught above the thumb-joint. He bellowed, and the iron jaws closed down, worrying the bone.

Quite suddenly, Thord screamed. Not for pain, but for panic. And the rows of watching men swayed forward, and even the Lord Ciaran rose up, startled.

"Hark!" ran the whispering around the fire. "Hark how he growls!"

Thord had let go of Stark's hair and was beating him about the head with his clenched fist. His face was white.

"Werewolf!" he screamed. "Let me go, beast-thing! Let me go!"

But the dark man clung to Thord's wrist, snarling, and did not hear. After a bit there came the dull crack of bone.

Stark opened his jaws. Thord ceased to strike him. He backed off slowly, staring at the torn flesh. Stark had sunk down to the length of his arms.

With his left hand, Thord drew his knife. The Lord Ciaran stepped forward. "Wait, Thord!"

"It is a thing of evil," whispered the barbarian. "Warlock. Werewolf. Beast."

He sprang at Stark.

* * * * *

The man in armor moved, very swiftly, and the great axe went whirling through the air. It caught Thord squarely where the cords of his neck ran into the shoulder: caught, and shore on through.

There was a silence in the valley.

The Lord Ciaran walked slowly across the trampled snow and took up his axe again.

"I will be obeyed," he said. "And I will not stand for fear, not of god, man, nor devil." He gestured toward Stark. "Cut him down. And see that he does not die." He strode away, and Otar began to laugh.

From a vast distance, Stark heard that shrill, wild laughter. His mouth was full of blood, and he was mad with a cold fury.

A cunning that was purely animal guided his movements then. His head fell forward, and his body hung inert against the thongs. He might almost have been dead.

A knot of men came toward him. He listened to them. They were hesitant and afraid. Then, as he did not move, they plucked up courage and came closer, and one prodded him gently with the point of his spear.

"Prick him well," said another. "Let us be sure!"

The sharp point bit a little deeper. A few drops of blood welled out and joined the small red streams that ran from the weals of the lash. Stark did not stir.

The spearman grunted. "He is safe enough now."

Stark felt the knife blades working at the thongs. He waited. The rawhide snapped, and he was free.

He did not fall. He would not have fallen then if he had taken a death wound. He gathered his legs under him

and sprang.

He picked up the spearman in that first rush and flung him into the fire. Then he began to run toward the place where the scaly mounts were herded, leaving a trail of blood behind him on the snow.

A man loomed up in front of him. He saw the shadow of a spear and swerved, and caught the haft in his two hands. He wrenched it free and struck down with the butt of it, and went on. Behind him he heard voices shouting and the beginning of turmoil.

The Lord Ciaran turned and came back, striding fast.

There were men before Stark now, many men, the circle of watchers breaking up because there had been nothing more to watch. He gripped the long spear. It was a good weapon, better than the flint-tipped stick with which the boy N'Chaka had hunted the giant lizard of the rocks.

His body curved into a half crouch. He voiced one cry, the challenging scream of a predatory killer, and went in among the men.

He did slaughter with that spear. They were not expecting attack. They were not expecting anything. Stark had sprung to life too quickly. And they were afraid of him. He could smell the fear on them. Fear not of a man like themselves, but of a creature less and more than man.

He killed, and was happy.

They fell away from him, the wild riders of Mekh. They were sure now that he was a demon. He raged among them with the bright spear, and they heard again that sound that should not have come from a human throat, and their superstitious terror rose and sent them scrambling out of his path, trampling on each other in childish panic.

He broke through, and now there was nothing between him and escape but two mounted men who guarded the herd.

Being mounted, they had more courage. They felt that even a warlock could not stand against their charge. They came at him as he ran, the padded feet of their beasts making a muffled drumming in the snow.

Without breaking stride, Stark hurled his spear.

* * * * *

It drove through one man's body and tumbled him off, so that he fell under his comrade's mount and fouled its legs. It staggered and reared up, hissing, and Stark fled on.

Once he glanced over his shoulder. Through the milling, shouting crowd of men he glimpsed a dark, mailed figure with a winged mask, going through the ruck with a loping stride and bearing a sable axe raised high for the throwing.

Stark was close to the herd now. And they caught his scent.

The Norland brutes had never liked the smell of him, and now the reek of blood upon him was enough in itself to set them wild. They began to hiss and snarl uneasily, rubbing their reptilian flanks together as they wheeled around, staring at him with lambent eyes.

He rushed them, before they should

quite decide to break. He was quick enough to catch one by the fleshy comb that served it for a forelock, held it with savage indifference to its squealing, and leaped to its back. Then he let it bolt, and as he rode it he yelled, a shrill brute cry that urged the creatures on to panic.

The herd broke, stampeding outward from its center like a bursting shell.

Stark was in the forefront. Clinging low to the scaly neck, he saw the men of Mekh scattered and churned and tramped into the snow by the flying pads. In and out of the shelters, kicking the brush walls down, lifting up their harsh reptilian voices, they went racketing through the camp, leaving behind them wreckage as of a storm. And Stark went with them.

He snatched a cloak from off the shoulders of some petty chieftain as he went by, and then, twisting cruelly on the fleshy comb, beating with his fist at the creature's head, he got his mount turned in the way he wanted it to go, down the valley.

He caught one last glimpse of the Lord Ciaran, fighting to hold one of the creatures long enough to mount, and then a dozen striving bodies surged around him, and Stark was gone.

The beast did not slacken pace. It was as though it thought it could outrun the alien, bloody thing that clung to its back. The last fringes of the camp shot by and vanished in the gloom, and the clean snow of the lower valley lay open before it. The creature laid its belly to the ground and went, the white spray spurting from its heels.

Stark hung on. His strength was gone now, run out suddenly with the battle-madness. He became conscious now that he was sick and bleeding, that his body was one cruel pain. In that moment, more than in the hours that had gone before, he hated the black leader of the clans of Mekh.

That flight down the valley became a sort of ugly dream. Stark was aware of rock walls reeling past, and then they seemed to widen away and the wind came out of nowhere like the stroke of a great hammer, and he was on the open moors again.

The beast began to falter and slow down. Presently it stopped.

Stark scooped up snow to rub on his wounds. He came near to fainting, but the bleeding stopped and after that the pain was numbed to a dull ache. He wrapped the cloak around him and urged the beast to go on, gently this time, patiently, and after it had breathed it obeyed him, settling into the shuffling pace it could keep up for hours.

He was three days on the moors. Part of the time he rode in a sort of stupor, and part of the time he was feverishly alert, watching the skyline. Frequently he took the shapes of thrusting rocks for riders, and found what cover he could until he was sure they did not move. He was afraid to dismount, for the beast had no bridle. When it halted to rest he remained upon its back, shaking, his brow beaded with sweat.

The wind scoured his tracks clean as soon as he made them. Twice, in the

distance, he did see riders, and one of those times he burrowed into a tall drift and stayed there for several hours.

The ruined towers marched with him across the bitter land, lonely giants fifty miles apart. He did not go near them.

He knew that he wandered a good bit, but he could not help it, and it was probably his salvation. In those tortured badlands, riven by ages of frost and flood, one might follow a man on a straight track between two points. But to find a single rider lost in that wilderness was a matter of sheer luck, and the odds were with Stark.

One evening at sunset he came out upon a plain that sloped upward to a black and towering scarp, notched with a single pass.

The light was level and blood-red, glittering on the frosty rock so that it seemed the throat of the pass was aflame with evil fires. To Stark's mind, essentially primitive and stripped now of all its acquired reason, that narrow cleft appeared as the doorway to the dwelling place of demons as horrible as the fabled creatures that roam the Darkside of his native world.

He looked long at the Gates of Death, and a dark memory crept into his brain. Memory of that nightmare experience when the talisman had made him seem to walk into that frightful pass, not as Stark, but as Ban Cruach.

He remembered Otar's words: I have seen Ban Cruach the mighty. Was he still there beyond those darkling gates, fighting his unimagined war, alone?

Again, in memory, Stark heard the evil piping of the wind. Again, the shadow of a dim and terrible shape loomed up before him....

He forced remembrance of that vision from his mind, by a great effort. He could not turn back now. There was no place to go.

His weary beast plodded on, and now Stark saw as in a dream that a great walled city stood guard before that awful Gate. He watched the city glide toward him through a crimson haze, and fancied he could see the ages clustered like birds around the towers.

He had reached Kushat, with the talisman of Ban Cruach still strapped in the bloodstained belt around his waist.

He stood in a large square, lined about with huckster's stalls and the booths of wine-sellers. Beyond were buildings, streets, a city. Stark got a blurred impression of a grand and brooding darkness, bulking huge against the mountains, as bleak and proud as they, and quite as ancient, with many ruins and deserted quarters.

He was not sure how he had come there, but he was standing on his own feet, and someone was pouring sour wine into his mouth. He drank it greedily. There were people around him, jostling, chattering, demanding answers to their questions. A girl's voice said sharply, "Let him be! Can't you see he's hurt?"

Stark looked down. She was slim and ragged, with black hair and large eyes yellow as a cat's. She held a leather

bottle in her hands. She smiled at him and said, "I'm Thanis. Will you drink more wine?"

"I will," said Stark, and did, and then said, "Thank you, Thanis." He put his hand on her shoulder, to steady himself. It was a supple shoulder, surprisingly strong. He liked the feel of it.

The crowd was still churning around him, growing larger, and now he heard the tramp of military feet. A small detachment of men in light armor pushed their way through.

A very young officer whose breastplate hurt the eye with brightness demanded to be told at once who Stark was and why he had come there.

"No one crosses the moors in winter," he said, as though that in itself were a sign of evil intent.

"The clans of Mekh are crossing them," Stark answered. "An army, to take Kushat: one, two days behind me."

The crowd picked that up. Excited voices tossed it back and forth, and clamored for more news. Stark spoke to the officer.

"I will see your captain, and at once."

"You'll see the inside of a prison, more likely!" snapped the young man. "What's this nonsense about the clans of Mekh?"

Stark regarded him. He looked so long and so curiously that the crowd began to snicker and the officer's beardless face flushed pink to the ears.

"I have fought in many wars," said Stark gently. "And long ago I learned to listen, when someone came to warn me of attack."

"Better take him to the captain, Lugh," cried Thanis. "It's our skins too, you know, if there is war."

The crowd began to shout. They were all poor folk, wrapped in threadbare cloaks or tattered leather. They had no love for the guards. And whether there was war or not, their winter had been long and dull, and they were going to make the most of this excitement.

"Take him, Lugh! Let him warn the nobles. Let them think how they'll defend Kushat and the Gates of Death, now that the talisman is gone!"

"That is a lie!" Lugh shouted. "And you know the penalty for telling it. Hold your tongues, or I'll have you all whipped." He gestured angrily at Stark. "See if he is armed."

One of the soldiers stepped forward, but Stark was quicker. He slipped the thong and let the cloak fall, baring his upper body.

"The clansmen have already taken everything I owned," he said. "But they gave me something, in return."

The crowd stared at the half healed stripes that scarred him, and there was a drawing in of breath.

The soldier picked up the cloak and laid it over the Earthman's shoulders. And Lugh said sullenly, "Come, then."

Stark's fingers tightened on Thanis' shoulder. "Come with me, little one," he whispered. "Otherwise, I must crawl."

She smiled at him and came. The crowd followed.

The captain of the guards was a fleshy man with a smell of wine about him and a face already crumbling apart

though his hair was not yet grey. He sat in a squat tower above the square, and he observed Stark with no particular interest.

"You had something to tell," said Lugh. "Tell it."

* * * * *

Stark told them, leaving out all mention of Camar and the talisman. This was neither the time nor the man to hear that story. The captain listened to all he had to say about the gathering of the clans of Mekh, and then sat studying him with a bleary shrewdness.

"You have proof of all this?"

"These stripes. Their leader Ciaran ordered them laid on himself."

The captain sighed, and leaned back.

"Any wandering band of hunters could have scourged you," he said. "A nameless vagabond from the gods know where, and a lawless one at that, if I'm any judge of men: you probably deserved it."

He reached for wine, and smiled. "Look you, stranger. In the Norlands, no one makes war in the winter. And no one ever heard of Ciaran. If you hoped for a reward from the city, you overshot badly."

"The Lord Ciaran," said Stark, grimly controlling his anger, "will be battering at your gates within two days. And you will hear of him then."

"Perhaps. You can wait for him: in a cell. And you can leave Kushat with the first caravan after the thaw. We have enough rabble here without taking in more."

Thanis caught Stark by the cloak and held him back.

"Sir," she said, as though it were an unclean word. "I will vouch for the stranger."

The captain glanced at her. "You?"

"Sir, I am a free citizen of Kushat. According to law, I may vouch for him."

"If you scum of the Thieves' Quarter would practice the law as well as you prate it, we would have less trouble," growled the captain. "Very well, take the creature, if you want him. I don't suppose you've anything to lose."

Lugh laughed.

"Name and dwelling place," said the captain, and wrote them down. "Remember, he is not to leave the Quarter."

Thanis nodded. "Come," she said to Stark. He did not move, and she looked up at him. He was staring at the captain. His beard had grown in these last days, and his face was still scarred by Thord's blows and made wolfish with pain and fever. And now, out of this evil mask, his eyes were peering with a chill and terrible intensity at the soft-bellied man who sat and mocked him.

Thanis laid her hand on his rough cheek. "Come," she said. "Come and rest."

Gently she turned his head. He blinked and swayed, and she took him around the waist and led him unprotesting to the door.

There she paused, looking back.

"Sir," she said, very meekly, "news of this attack is being shouted through the Quarter now. If it should come, and it were known that you had the warning

and did not pass it on...." She made an expressive gesture, and went out.

Lugh glanced uneasily at the captain. "She's right, sir. If by chance the man did tell the truth...."

The captain swore. "Rot. A rogue's tale. And yet...." He scowled indecisively, and then reached for parchment. "After all, it's a simple thing. Write it up, pass it on, and let the nobles do the worrying."

His pen began to scratch.

Thanis took Stark by steep and narrow ways, darkling now in the afterglow, where the city climbed and fell again over the uneven rock. Stark was aware of the heavy smells of spices and unfamiliar foods, and the musky undertones of a million generations swarmed together to spawn and die in these crowded catacombs of slate and stone.

There was a house, blending into other houses, close under the loom of the great Wall. There was a flight of steps, hollowed deep with use, twisting crazily around outer corners.

There was a low room, and a slender man named Balin, vaguely glimpsed, who said he was Thanis' brother. There was a bed of skins and woven cloths.

Stark slept.

* * * * *

Hands and voices called him back. Strong hands shaking him, urgent voices. He started up growling, like an animal suddenly awaked, still lost in the dark mists of exhaustion. Balin swore, and caught his fingers away.

"What is this you have brought home, Thanis? By the gods, it snapped at me!"

Thanis ignored him. "Stark," she said. "Stark! Listen. Men are coming. Soldiers. They will question you. Do you hear me?"

Stark said heavily, "I hear."

"Do not speak of Camar!"

Stark got to his feet, and Balin said hastily, "Peace! The thing is safe. I would not steal a death warrant!"

His voice had a ring of truth. Stark sat down again. It was an effort to keep awake. There was clamor in the street below. It was still night.

Balin said carefully, "Tell them what you told the captain, nothing more. They will kill you if they know."

A rough hand thundered at the door, and a voice cried, "Open up!"

Balin sauntered over to lift the bar. Thanis sat beside Stark, her hand touching his. Stark rubbed his face. He had been shaved and washed, his wounds rubbed with salve. The belt was gone, and his blood-stained clothing. He realized only then that he was naked, and drew a cloth around him. Thanis whispered, "The belt is there on that peg, under your cloak."

Balin opened the door, and the room was full of men.

Stark recognized the captain. There were others, four of them, young, old, intermediate, annoyed at being hauled away from their beds and their gaming tables at this hour. The sixth man wore the jewelled cuirass of a noble. He had a nice, a kind face. Grey hair, mild eyes, soft cheeks. A fine man, but ludicrous

in the trappings of a soldier.

"Is this the man?" he asked, and the captain nodded.

"Yes." It was his turn to say Sir.

Balin brought a chair. He had a fine flourish about him. He wore a crimson jewel in his left ear, and every line of him was quick and sensitive, instinct with mockery. His eyes were brightly cynical, in a face worn lean with years of merry sinning. Stark liked him.

He was a civilized man. They all were: the noble, the captain, the lot of them. So civilized that the origins of their culture were forgotten half an age before the first clay brick was laid in Babylon.

Too civilized, Stark thought. Peace had drawn their fangs and cut their claws. He thought of the wild clansmen coming fast across the snow, and felt a certain pity for the men of Kushat.

The noble sat down.

"This is a strange tale you bring, wanderer. I would hear it from your own lips."

Stark told it. He spoke slowly, watching every word, cursing the weariness that fogged his brain.

The noble, who was called Rogain, asked him questions. Where was the camp? How many men? What were the exact words of the Lord Ciaran, and who was he?

Stark answered, with meticulous care.

Rogain sat for some time lost in thought. He seemed worried and upset, one hand playing aimlessly with the hilt of his sword. A scholar's hand, without a callous on it.

"There is one thing more," said Rogain. "What business had you on the moors in winter?"

Stark smiled. "I am a wanderer by profession."

"Outlaw?" asked the captain, and Stark shrugged.

"Mercenary is a kinder word."

* * * * *

Rogain studied the pattern of stripes on the Earthman's dark skin. "Why did the Lord Ciaran, so-called, order you scourged?"

"I had thrashed one of his chieftains."

Rogain sighed and rose. He stood regarding Stark from under brooding brows, and at length he said, "It is a wild tale. I can't believe it: and yet, why should you lie?"

He paused, as though hoping that Stark would answer that and relieve him of worry.

Stark yawned. "The tale is easily proved. Wait a day or two."

"I will arm the city," said Rogain. "I dare not do otherwise. But I will tell you this." An astonishing unpleasant look came into his eyes. "If the attack does not come: if you have set a whole city by the ears for nothing: I will have you flayed alive and your body tumbled over the Wall for the carrion birds to feed on."

He strode out, taking his retinue with him. Balin smiled. "He will do it, too," he said, and dropped the bar.

Stark did not answer. He stared at Balin, and then at Thanis, and then at the

belt hanging on the peg, in a curiously blank and yet penetrating fashion, like an animal that thinks its own thoughts. He took a deep breath. Then, as though he found the air clean of danger, he rolled over and went instantly to sleep.

Balin lifted his shoulders expressively. He grinned at Thanis. "Are you positive it's human?"

"He's beautiful," said Thanis, and tucked the cloths around him. "Hold your tongue." She continued to sit there, watching Stark's face as the slow dreams moved across it. Balin laughed.

It was evening again when Stark awoke. He sat up, stretching lazily. Thanis crouched by the hearthstone, stirring something savory in a blackened pot. She wore a red kirtle and a necklet of beaten gold, and her hair was combed out smooth and shining.

She smiled at him and rose, bringing him his own boots and trousers, carefully cleaned, and a tunic of leather tanned fine and soft as silk. Stark asked her where she got it.

"Balin stole it: from the baths where the nobles go. He said you might as well have the best." She laughed. "He had a devil of a time finding one big enough to fit you."

She watched with unashamed interest while he dressed. Stark said, "Don't burn the soup."

She put her tongue out at him. "Better be proud of that fine hide while you have it," she said. "There's no sign of attack."

Stark was aware of sounds that had not been there before: the pacing of men on the Wall above the house, the calling of the watch. Kushat was armed and ready: and his time was running out. He hoped that Ciaran had not been delayed on the moors.

Thanis said, "I should explain about the belt. When Balin undressed you, he saw Camar's name scratched on the inside of the boss. And, he can open a lizard's egg without harming the shell."

"What about you?" asked Stark.

She flexed her supple fingers. "I do well enough."

* * * * *

Balin came in. He had been seeking news, but there was little to be had.

"The soldiers are grumbling about a false alarm," he said. "The people are excited, but more as though they were playing a game. Kushat has not fought a war for centuries." He sighed. "The pity of it is, Stark, I believe your story. And I'm afraid."

Thanis handed him a steaming bowl. "Here: employ your tongue with this. Afraid, indeed! Have you forgotten the Wall? No one has carried it since the city was built. Let them attack!"

Stark was amused. "For a child, you know much concerning war."

"I knew enough to save your skin!" she flared, and Balin smiled.

"She has you there, Stark. And speaking of skins...." He glanced up at the belt. "Or better, speaking of talismans, which we were not. How did you come by it?"

Stark told him. "He had a sin on his soul, did Camar. And: he was my friend."

Balin looked at him with deep respect. "You were a fool," he said. "Look you. The thing is returned to Kushat. Your promise is kept. There is nothing for you here but danger, and were I you I would not wait to be flayed, or slain, or taken in a quarrel that is not yours."

"Ah," said Stark softly, "but it is mine. The Lord Ciaran made it so." He, too, glanced at the belt. "What of the talisman?"

"Return it where it came from," Thanis said. "My brother is a better thief than Camar. He can certainly do that."

"No!" said Balin, with surprising force. "We will keep it, Stark and I. Whether it has power, I do not know. But if it has: I think Kushat will need it, and in strong hands."

Stark said somberly, "It has power, the Talisman. Whether for good or evil, I don't know."

They looked at him, startled. But a touch of awe seemed to repress their curiosity.

He could not tell them. He was, somehow, reluctant to tell anyone of that dark vision of what lay beyond the Gates of Death, which the talisman of Ban Cruach had lent him.

Balin stood up. "Well, for good or evil, at least the sacred relic of Ban Cruach has come home." He yawned. "I am going to bed. Will you come, Thanis, or will you stay and quarrel with our guest?"

"I will stay," she said, "and quarrel."

"Ah, well." Balin sighed puckishly. "Good night." He vanished into an inner room. Stark looked at Thanis. She had a warm mouth, and her eyes were beautiful, and full of light.

He smiled, holding out his hand.

The night wore on, and Stark lay drowsing. Thanis had opened the curtains. Wind and moonlight swept together into the room, and she stood leaning upon the sill, above the slumbering city. The smile that lingered in the corners of her mouth was sad and faraway, and very tender.

Stark stirred uneasily, making small sounds in his throat. His motions grew violent. Thanis crossed the room and touched him.

Instantly he was awake.

"Animal," she said softly. "You dream."

Stark shook his head. His eyes were still clouded, though not with sleep. "Blood," he said, "heavy in the wind."

"I smell nothing but the dawn," she said, and laughed.

Stark rose. "Get Balin. I'm going up on the Wall."

She did not know him now. "What is it, Stark? What's wrong?"

"Get Balin." Suddenly it seemed that the room stifled him. He caught up his cloak and Camar's belt and flung open the door, standing on the narrow steps outside. The moonlight caught in his eyes, pale as frost-fire.

Thanis shivered. Balin joined her without being called. He, too, had slept but lightly. Together they followed Stark up the rough-cut stair that led to the top of the Wall.

He looked southward, where the

plain ran down from the mountains and spread away below Kushat. Nothing moved out there. Nothing marred the empty whiteness. But Stark said,

"They will attack at dawn."

They waited. Some distance away a guard leaned against the parapet, huddled in his cloak. He glanced at them incuriously. It was bitterly cold. The wind came whistling down through the Gates of Death, and below in the streets the watchfires shuddered and flared.

They waited, and still there was nothing.

Balin said impatiently, "How can you know they're coming?"

Stark shivered, a shallow rippling of the flesh that had nothing to do with cold, and every muscle of his body came alive. Phobos plunged downward. The moonlight dimmed and changed, and the plain was very empty, very still.

"They will wait for darkness. They will have an hour or so, between moonset and dawn."

Thanis muttered, "Dreams! Besides, I'm cold." She hesitated, and then crept in under Balin's cloak. Stark had gone away from her. She watched him sulkily where he leaned upon the stone. He might have been part of it, as dark and unstirring.

Deimos sank low toward the west.

Stark turned his head, drawn inevitably to look toward the cliffs above Kushat, soaring upward to blot out half the sky. Here, close under them, they seemed to tower outward in a curving mass, like the last wave of eternity rolling down, crested white with the ash of shattered worlds.

I have stood beneath those cliffs before. I have felt them leaning down to crush me, and I have been afraid.

He was still afraid. The mind that had poured its memories into that crystal lens had been dead a million years, but neither time nor death had dulled the terror that beset Ban Cruach in his journey through that nightmare pass.

He looked into the black and narrow mouth of the Gates of Death, cleaving the scarp like a wound, and the primitive ape-thing within him cringed and moaned, oppressed with a sudden sense of fate.

He had come painfully across half a world, to crouch before the Gates of Death. Some evil magic had let him see forbidden things, had linked his mind in an unholy bond with the long-dead mind of one who had been half a god. These evil miracles had not been for nothing. He would not be allowed to go unscathed.

He drew himself up sharply then, and swore. He had left N'Chaka behind, a naked boy running in a place of rocks and sun on Mercury. He had become Eric John Stark, a man, and civilized. He thrust the senseless premonition from him, and turned his back upon the mountains.

Deimos touched the horizon. A last gleam of reddish light tinged the snow, and then was gone.

Thanis, who was half asleep, said with sudden irritation, "I do not believe in your barbarians. I'm going home."

She thrust Balin aside and went away, down the steps.

The plain was now in utter darkness, under the faint, far Northern stars.

Stark settled himself against the parapet. There was a sort of timeless patience about him. Balin envied it. He would have liked to go with Thanis. He was cold and doubtful, but he stayed.

Time passed, endless minutes of it, lengthening into what seemed hours.

Stark said, "Can you hear them?"

"No."

"They come." His hearing, far keener than Balin's, picked up the little sounds, the vast inchoate rustling of an army on the move in stealth and darkness. Light-armed men, hunters, used to stalking wild beasts in the show. They could move softly, very softly.

"I hear nothing," Balin said, and again they waited.

The westering stars moved toward the horizon, and at length in the east a dim pallor crept across the sky.

The plain was still shrouded in night, but now Stark could make out the high towers of the King City of Kushat, ghostly and indistinct: the ancient, proud high towers of the rulers and their nobles, set above the crowded Quarters of merchants and artisans and thieves. He wondered who would be king in Kushat by the time this unrisen sun had set.

"You were wrong," said Balin, peering. "There is nothing on the plain."

Stark said, "Wait."

* * * * *

Swiftly now, in the thin air of Mars, the dawn came with a rush and a leap, flooding the world with harsh light. It flashed in cruel brilliance from sword-blades, from spearheads, from helmets and burnished mail, from the war-harness of beasts, glistened on bare russet heads and coats of leather, set the banners of the clans to burning, crimson and gold and green, bright against the snow.

There was no sound, not a whisper, in all the land.

Somewhere a hunting horn sent forth one deep cry to split the morning. Then burst out the wild skirling of the mountain pipes and the broken thunder of drums, and a wordless scream of exultation that rang back from the Wall of Kushat like the very voice of battle. The men of Mekh began to move.

Raggedly, slowly at first, then more swiftly as the press of warriors broke and flowed, the barbarians swept toward the city as water sweeps over a broken dam.

Knots and clumps of men, tall men running like deer, leaping, shouting, swinging their great brands. Riders, spurring their mounts until they fled belly down. Spears, axes, sword-blades tossing, a sea of men and beasts, rushing, trampling, shaking the ground with the thunder of their going.

And ahead of them all came a solitary figure in black mail, riding a raking beast trapped all in black, and bearing a sable axe.

Kushat came to life. There was a swarming and a yelling in the streets, and soldiers began to pour up onto the

Wall. A thin company, Stark thought, and shook his head. Mobs of citizens choked the alleys, and every rooftop was full. A troop of nobles went by, brave in their bright mail, to take up their post in the square by the great gate.

Balin said nothing, and Stark did not disturb his thoughts. From the look of him, they were dark indeed.

Soldiers came and ordered them off the Wall. They went back to their own roof, where they were joined by Thanis. She was in a high state of excitement, but unafraid.

"Let them attack!" she said. "Let them break their spears against the Wall. They will crawl away again."

Stark began to grow restless. Up in their high emplacements, the big ballistas creaked and thrummed. The muted song of the bows became a wailing hum. Men fell, and were kicked off the ledges by their fellows. The blood-howl of the clans rang unceasing on the frosty air, and Stark heard the rap of scaling ladders against stone.

Thanis said abruptly, "What is that: that sound like thunder?"

"Rams," he answered. "They are battering the gate."

She listened, and Stark saw in her face the beginning of fear.

It was a long fight. Stark watched it hungrily from the roof all that morning. The soldiers of Kushat did bravely and well, but they were as folded sheep against the tall killers of the mountains. By noon the officers were beating the Quarters for men to replace the slain.

Stark and Balin went up again, onto the Wall.

The clans had suffered. Their dead lay in windrows under the Wall, amid the broken ladders. But Stark knew his barbarians. They had sat restless and chafing in the valley for many days, and now the battle-madness was on them and they were not going to be stopped.

Wave after wave of them rolled up, and was cast back, and came on again relentlessly. The intermittent thunder boomed still from the gates, where sweating giants swung the rams under cover of their own bowmen. And everywhere, up and down through the forefront of the fighting, rode the man in black armor, and wild cheering followed him.

Balin said heavily, "It is the end of Kushat."

* * * * *

A ladder banged against the stones a few feet away. Men swarmed up the rungs, fierce-eyed clansmen with laughter in their mouths. Stark was first at the head.

They had given him a spear. He spitted two men through with it and lost it, and a third man came leaping over the parapet. Stark received him into his arms.

Balin watched. He saw the warrior go crashing back, sweeping his fellows off the ladder. He saw Stark's face. He heard the sounds and smelled the blood and sweat of war, and he was sick to the marrow of his bones, and his hatred of the barbarians was a terrible thing.

Stark caught up a dead man's blade, and within ten minutes his arm was as

red as a butcher's. And ever he watched the winged helm that went back and forth below, a standard to the clans.

By mid-afternoon the barbarians had gained the Wall in three places. They spread inward along the ledges, pouring up in a resistless tide, and the defenders broke. The rout became a panic.

"It's all over now," Stark said. "Find Thanis, and hide her."

Balin let fall his sword. "Give me the talisman," he whispered, and Stark saw that he was weeping. "Give it me, and I will go beyond the Gates of Death and rouse Ban Cruach from his sleep. And if he has forgotten Kushat, I will take his power into my own hands. I will fling wide the Gates of Death and loose destruction on the men of Mekh: or if the legends are all lies, then I will die."

He was like a man crazed. "Give me the talisman!"

Stark slapped him, carefully and without heat, across the face. "Get your sister, Balin. Hide her, unless you would be uncle to a red-haired brat."

He went then, like a man who has been stunned. Screaming women with their children clogged the ways that led inward from the Wall, and there was bloody work afoot on the rooftops and in the narrow alleys.

The gate was holding, still.

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Stark forced his way toward the square. The booths of the hucksters were overthrown, the wine-jars broken and the red wine spilled. Beasts squealed and stamped, tired of their chafing harness, driven wild by the shouting and the smell of blood. The dead were heaped high where they had fallen from above.

They were all soldiers here, clinging grimly to their last foothold. The deep song of the rams shook the very stones. The iron-sheathed timbers of the gate gave back an answering scream, and toward the end all other sounds grew hushed. The nobles came down slowly from the Wall and mounted, and sat waiting.

There were fewer of them now. Their bright armor was dented and stained, and their faces had a pallor on them.

One last hammer-stroke of the rams.

With a bitter shriek the weakened bolts tore out, and the great gate was broken through.

The nobles of Kushat made their first, and final charge.

As soldiers they went up against the riders of Mekh, and as soldiers they held them until they died. Those that were left were borne back into the square, caught as in the crest of an avalanche. And first through the gates came the winged battle-mask of the Lord Ciaran, and the sable axe that drank men's lives where it hewed.

There was a beast with no rider to claim it, tugging at its headrope. Stark swung onto the saddle pad and cut it free. Where the press was thickest, a welter of struggling brutes and men fighting knee to knee, there was the man in black armor, riding like a god, magnificent, born to war. Stark's eyes shone with a strange, cold light. He struck his

heels hard into the scaly flanks. The beast plunged forward.

In and over and through, making the long sword sing. The beast was strong, and frightened beyond fear. It bit and trampled, and Stark cut a path for them, and presently he shouted above the din,

"Ho, there! Ciaran!"

The black mask turned toward him, and the remembered voice spoke from behind the barred slot, joyously.

"The wanderer. The wild man!"

Their two mounts shocked together. The axe came down in a whistling curve, and a red sword-blade flashed to meet it. Swift, swift, a ringing clash of steel, and the blade was shattered and the axe fallen to the ground.

Stark pressed in.

Ciaran reached for his sword, but his hand was numbed by the force of that blow and he was slow, a split second. The hilt of Stark's weapon, still clutched in his own numbed grip, fetched him a stunning blow on the helm, so that the metal rang like a flawed bell.

The Lord Ciaran reeled back, only for a moment, but long enough. Stark grasped the war-mask and ripped it off, and got his hands around the naked throat.

He did not break that neck, as he had planned. And the Clansmen who had started in to save their leader stopped and did not move.

Stark knew now why the Lord Ciaran had never shown his face.

The throat he held was white and strong, and his hands around it were buried in a mane of red-gold hair that fell down over the shirt of mail. A red mouth passionate with fury, wonderful curving bone under sculptured flesh, eyes fierce and proud and tame-less as the eyes of a young eagle, fire-blue, defying him, hating him....

"By the gods," said Stark, very softly. "By the eternal gods!"

A woman! And in that moment of amazement, she was quicker than he.

There was nothing to warn him, no least flicker of expression. Her two fists came up together between his outstretched arms and caught him under the jaw with a force that nearly snapped his neck. He went over backward, clean out of the saddle, and lay sprawled on the bloody stones, half stunned, the wind knocked out of him.

The woman wheeled her mount. Bending low, she took up the axe from where it had fallen, and faced her warriors, who were as dazed as Stark.

"I have led you well," she said. "I have taken you Kushat. Will any man dispute me?"

They knew the axe, if they did not know her. They looked from side to side uneasily, completely at a loss, and Stark, still gasping on the ground, thought that he had never seen anything as proud and beautiful as she was then in her black mail, with her bright hair blowing and her glance like blue lightning.

The nobles of Kushat chose that moment to charge. This strange unmasking of the Mekhish lord had given them time to rally, and now they thought that the Gods had wrought a miracle to help

them. They found hope, where they had lost everything but courage.

"A wench!" they cried. "A strumpet of the camps. A woman!"

They howled it like an epithet, and tore into the barbarians.

She who had been the Lord Ciaran drove the spurs in deep, so that the beast leaped forward screaming. She went, and did not look to see if any had followed, in among the men of Kushat. And the great axe rose and fell, and rose again.

She killed three, and left two others bleeding on the stones, and not once did she look back.

The clansmen found their tongues.

"Ciaran! Ciaran!"

The crashing shout drowned out the sound of battle. As one man, they turned and followed her.

Stark, scrambling for his life underfoot, could not forbear smiling. Their childlike minds could see only two alternatives: to slay her out of hand, or to worship her. They had chosen to worship. He thought the bards would be singing of the Lord Ciaran of Mekh as long as there were men to listen.

He managed to take cover behind a wrecked booth, and presently make his way out of the square. They had forgotten him, for the moment. He did not wish to wait, just then, until they: or she: remembered.

She.

He still did not believe it, quite. He touched the bruise under his jaw where she had struck him, and thought of the lithe, swift strength of her, and the way she had ridden alone into battle. He remembered the death of Thord, and how she had kept her red wolves tamed, and he was filled with wonder, and a deep excitement.

He remembered what she had said to him once: We are of one blood, though we be strangers.

He laughed, silently, and his eyes were very bright.

The tide of war had rolled on toward the King City, where from the sound of it there was hot fighting around the castle. Eddies of the main struggle swept shrieking through the streets, but the rat-runs under the Wall were clear. Everyone had stampeded inward, the victims with the victors close on their heels. The short northern day was almost gone.

He found a hiding place that offered reasonable safety, and settled himself to wait.

Night came, but he did not move. From the sounds that reached him, the sacking of Kushat was in full swing. They were looting the richer streets first. Their upraised voices were thick with wine, and mingled with the cries of women. The reflection of many fires tinged the sky.

By midnight the sounds began to slacken, and by the second hour after the city slept, drugged with wine and blood and the weariness of battle. Stark went silently out into the streets, toward the King City.

According to the immemorial pattern of Martian city-states, the castles of the king and the noble families were

clustered together in solitary grandeur. Many of the towers were fallen now, the great halls open to the sky. Time had crushed the grandeur that had been Kushat, more fatally than the boots of any conqueror.

In the house of the king, the flamboys guttered low and the chieftains of Mekh slept with their weary pipers among the benches of the banquet hall. In the niches of the tall, carved portal, the guards nodded over their spears. They, too, had fought that day. Even so, Stark did not go near them.

Shivering slightly in the bitter wind, he followed the bulk of the massive walls until he found a postern door, half open as some kitchen knave had left it in his flight. Stark entered, moving like a shadow.

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The passageway was empty, dimly lighted by a single torch. A stairway branched off from it, and he climbed that, picking his way by guess and his memories of similar castles he had seen in the past.

He emerged into a narrow hall, obviously for the use of servants. A tapestry closed the end, stirring in the chill draught that blew along the floor. He peered around it, and saw a massive, vaulted corridor, the stone walls panelled in wood much split and blackened by time, but still showing forth the wonderful carvings of beasts and men, larger than life and overlaid with gold and bright enamel.

From the corridor a single doorway opened: and Otar slept before it, curled on a pallet like a dog.

Stark went back down the narrow hall. He was sure that there must be a back entrance to the king's chambers, and he found the little door he was looking for.

From there on was darkness. He felt his way, stepping with infinite caution, and presently there was a faint gleam of light filtering around the edges of another curtain of heavy tapestry.

He crept toward it, and heard a man's slow breathing on the other side.

He drew the curtain back, a careful inch. The man was sprawled on a bench athwart the door. He slept the honest sleep of exhaustion, his sword in his hand, the stains of his day's work still upon him. He was alone in the small room. A door in the farther wall was closed.

Stark hit him, and caught the sword before it fell. The man grunted once and became utterly relaxed. Stark bound him with his own harness and shoved a gag in his mouth, and went on, through the door in the opposite wall.

The room beyond was large and high and full of shadows. A fire burned low on the hearth, and the uncertain light showed dimly the hangings and the rich stuffs that carpeted the floor, and the dark, sparse shapes of furniture.

Stark made out the lattice-work of a covered bed, let into the wall after the northern fashion.

She was there, sleeping, her red-gold hair the colour of the flames.

He stood a moment, watching her, and then, as though she sensed his pres-

ence, she stirred and opened her eyes.

She did not cry out. He had known that she would not. There was no fear in her. She said, with a kind of wry humor, "I will have a word with my guards about this."

* * * * *

She flung aside the covering and rose. She was almost as tall as he, white-skinned and very straight. He noted the long thighs, the narrow loins and magnificent shoulders, the small virginal breasts. She moved as a man moves, without coquetry. A long furred gown, that Stark guessed had lately graced the shoulders of the king, lay over a chair. She put it on.

"Well, wild man?"

"I have come to warn you." He hesitated over her name, and she said,

"My mother named me Ciara, if that seems better to you." She gave him her falcon's glance. "I could have slain you in the square, but now I think you did me a service. The truth would have come out sometime: better then, when they had no time to think about it." She laughed. "They will follow me now, over the edge of the world, if I ask them."

Stark said slowly, "Even beyond the Gates of Death?"

"Certainly, there. Above all, there!"

She turned to one of the tall windows and looked out at the cliffs and the high notch of the pass, touched with greenish silver by the little moons.

"Ban Cruach was a great king. He came out of nowhere to rule the Norlands with a rod of iron, and men speak of him still as half a god. Where did he get his power, if not from beyond the Gates of Death? Why did he go back there at the end of his days, if not to hide away his secret? Why did he build Kushat to guard the pass forever, if not to hoard that power out of reach of all the other nations of Mars?

"Yes, Stark. My men will follow me. And if they do not, I will go alone."

"You are not Ban Cruach. Nor am I." He took her by the shoulders. "Listen, Ciara. You're already king in the Norlands, and half a legend as you stand. Be content."

"Content!" Her face was close to his, and he saw the blaze of it, the white intensity of ambition and an iron pride. "Are you content?" she asked him. "Have you ever been content?"

He smiled. "For strangers, we do know each other well. No. But the spurs are not so deep in me."

"The wind and the fire. One spends its strength in wandering, the other devours. But one can help the other. I made you an offer once, and you said you would not bargain unless you could look into my eyes. Look now!"

He did, and his hands upon her shoulders trembled.

"No," he said harshly. "You're a fool, Ciara. Would you be as Otar, mad with what you have seen?"

"Otar is an old man, and likely crazed before he crossed the mountains. Besides: I am not Otar."

Stark said somberly, "Even the bravest may break. Ban Cruach himself...."

She must have seen the shadow of that horror in his eyes, for he felt her

body tense.

"What of Ban Cruach? What do you know, Stark? Tell me!"

He was silent, and she went from him angrily.

"You have the talisman," she said. "That I am sure of. And if need be, I will flay you alive to get it!" She faced him across the room. "But whether I get it or not, I will go through the Gates of Death. I must wait, now, until after the thaw. The warm wind will blow soon, and the gorges will be running full. But afterward, I will go, and no talk of fears and demons will stop me."

She began to pace the room with long strides, and the full skirts of the gown made a subtle whispering about her.

"You do not know," she said, in a low and bitter voice. "I was a girl-child, without a name. By the time I could walk, I was a servant in the house of my grandfather. The two things that kept me living were pride and hate. I left my scrubbing of floors to practice arms with the young boys. I was beaten for it every day, but every day I went. I knew even then that only force would free me. And my father was a king's son, a good man of his hands. His blood was strong in me. I learned."

She held her head very high. She had earned the right to hold it so. She finished quietly,

"I have come a long way. I will not turn back now."

"Ciara." Stark came and stood before her. "I am talking to you as a fighting man, an equal. There may be power behind the Gates of Death, I do not know. But this I have seen: madness, horror, an evil that is beyond our understanding.

"I think you will not accuse me of cowardice. And yet I would not go into that pass for all the power of all the kings of Mars!"

Once started, he could not stop. The full force of that dark vision of the talisman swept over him again in memory. He came closer to her, driven by the need to make her understand.

"Yes, I have the talisman! And I have had a taste of its purpose. I think Ban Cruach left it as a warning, so that none would follow him. I have seen the temples and the palaces glitter in the ice. I have seen the Gates of Death: not with my own eyes, Ciara, but with his. With the eyes and the memories of Ban Cruach!"

He had caught her again, his hands strong on her strong arms.

"Will you believe me, or must you see for yourself: the dreadful things that walk those buried streets, the shapes that rise from nowhere in the mists of the pass?"

Her gaze burned into his. Her breath was hot and sweet upon his lips, and she was like a sword between his hands, shining and unafraid.

"Give me the talisman. Let me see!"

He answered furiously, "You are mad. As mad as Otar." And he kissed her, in a rage, in a panic lest all that beauty be destroyed: a kiss as brutal as a blow, that left him shaken.

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She backed away slowly, one step, and he thought she would have killed him. He said heavily:

"If you will see, you will. The thing is here."

He opened the boss and laid the crystal in her outstretched hand. He did not meet her eyes.

"Sit down. Hold the flat side against your brow."

She sat, in a great chair of carven wood. Stark noticed that her hand was unsteady, her face the colour of white ash. He was glad she did not have the axe where she could reach it. She did not play at anger.

For a long moment she studied the intricate lens, the incredible depository of a man's mind. Then she raised it slowly to her forehead.

He saw her grow rigid in the chair. How long he watched beside her he never knew. Seconds, an eternity. He saw her eyes turn blank and strange, and a shadow came into her face, changing it subtly, altering the lines, so that it seemed almost a stranger was peering through her flesh.

All at once, in a voice that was not her own, she cried out terribly, "Oh gods of Mars!"

The talisman dropped rolling to the floor, and Ciara fell forward into Stark's arms.

He thought at first that she was dead. He carried her to the bed, in an agony of fear that surprised him with its violence, and laid her down, and put his hand over her heart.

It was beating strongly. Relief that was almost a sickness swept over him. He turned, searching vaguely for wine, and saw the talisman. He picked it up and put it back inside the boss. A jewelled flagon stood on a table across the room. He took it and started back, and then, abruptly, there was a wild clamor in the hall outside and Otar was shouting Ciara's name, pounding on the door.

It was not barred. In another moment they would burst through, and he knew that they would not stop to enquire what he was doing there.

He dropped the flagon and went out swiftly, the way he had come. The guard was still unconscious. In the narrow hall beyond, Stark hesitated. A woman's voice was rising high above the tumult in the main corridor, and he thought he recognized it.

He went to the tapestry curtain and looked for the second time around its edge.

The lofty space was full of men, newly wakened from their heavy sleep and as nervous as so many bears. Thanis struggled in the grip of two of them. Her scarlet kirtle was torn, her hair flying in wild elf-locks, and her face was the face of a mad thing. The whole story of the doom of Kushat was written large upon it.

She screamed again and again, and would not be silenced.

"Tell her, the witch that leads you! Tell her that she is already doomed to death, with all her army!"

Otar opened up the door of Ciara's room.

Thanis surged forward. She must

have fled through all that castle before she was caught, and Stark's heart ached for her.

"You!" she shrieked through the doorway, and poured out all the filth of the quarter upon Ciara's name. "Balin has gone to bring doom upon you! He will open wide the Gates of Death, and then you will die!: die!: die!"

Stark felt the shock of a terrible dread, as he let the curtain fall. Mad with hatred against conquerors, Balin had fulfilled his raging promise and had gone to fling open the Gates of Death.

Remembering his nightmare vision of the shining, evil ones whom Ban Cruach had long ago prisoned beyond those gates, Stark felt a sickness grow within him as he went down the stair and out the postern door.

It was almost dawn. He looked up at the brooding cliffs, and it seemed to him that the wind in the pass had a sound of laughter that mocked his growing dread.

He knew what he must do, if an ancient, mysterious horror was not to be released upon Kushat.

I may still catch Balin before he has gone too far! If I don't... .

He dared not think of that. He began to walk very swiftly through the night streets, toward the distant, towering Gates of Death.

It was past noon. He had climbed high toward the saddle of the pass. Kushat lay small below him, and he could see now the pattern of the gorges, cut ages deep in the living rock, that carried the spring torrents of the watershed around the mighty ledge on which the city was built.

The pass itself was channeled, but only by its own snows and melting ice. It was too high for a watercourse. Nevertheless, Stark thought, a man might find it hard to stay alive if he were caught there by the thaw.

He had seen nothing of Balin. The gods knew how many hours' start he had. Stark imagined him, scrambling wild-eyed over the rocks, driven by the same madness that had sent Thanis up into the castle to call down destruction on Ciara's head.

The sun was brilliant but without warmth. Stark shivered, and the icy wind blew strong. The cliffs hung over him, vast and sheer and crushing, and the narrow mouth of the pass was before him. He would go no farther. He would turn back, now.

But he did not. He began to walk forward, into the Gates of Death.

The light was dim and strange at the bottom of that cleft. Little veils of mist crept and clung between the ice and the rock, thickened, became more dense as he went farther and farther into the pass. He could not see, and the wind spoke with many tongues, piping in the crevices of the cliffs.

The steps of the Earthman slowed and faltered. He had known fear in his life before. But now he was carrying the burden of two men's terrors: Ban Cruach's, and his own.

He stopped, enveloped in the clinging mist. He tried to reason with himself: that Ban Cruach's fears had died a mil-

lion years ago, that Otar had come this way and lived, and Balin had come also.

But the thin veneer of civilization sloughed away and left him with the naked bones of truth. His nostrils twitched to the smell of evil, the subtle unclean taint that only a beast, or one as close to it as he, can sense and know. Every nerve was a point of pain, raw with apprehension. An overpowering recognition of danger, hidden somewhere, mocking at him, made his very body change, draw in upon itself and flatten forward, so that when at last he went on again he was more like a four-footed thing than a man walking upright.

Infinitely wary, silent, moving surely over the ice and the tumbled rock, he followed Balin. He had ceased to think. He was going now on sheer instinct.

The pass led on and on. It grew darker, and in the dim uncanny twilight there were looming shapes that menaced him, and ghostly wings that brushed him, and a terrible stillness that was not broken by the eerie voices of the wind.

Rock and mist and ice. Nothing that moved or lived. And yet the sense of danger deepened, and when he paused the beating of his heart was like thunder in his ears.

Once, far away, he thought he heard the echoes of a man's voice crying, but he had no sight of Balin.

The pass began to drop, and the twilight deepened into a kind of sickly night.

On and down, more slowly now, crouching, slinking, heavily oppressed, tempted to snarl at boulders and tear at wraiths of fog. He had no idea of the miles he had travelled. But the ice was thicker now, the cold intense.

The rock walls broke off sharply. The mist thinned. The pallid darkness lifted to a clear twilight. He came to the end of the Gates of Death.

Stark stopped. Ahead of him, almost blocking the end of the pass, something dark and high and massive loomed in the thinning mists.

It was a great cairn, and upon it sat a figure, facing outward from the Gates of Death as though it kept watch over whatever country lay beyond.

The figure of a man in antique Martian armor.

After a moment, Stark crept toward the cairn. He was still almost all savage, torn between fear and fascination.

He was forced to scramble over the lower rocks of the cairn itself. Quite suddenly he felt a hard shock, and a flashing sensation of warmth that was somehow inside his own flesh, and not in any tempering of the frozen air. He gave a startled leap forward, and whirled, looking up into the face of the mailed figure with the confused idea that it had reached down and struck him.

It had not moved, of course. And Stark knew, with no need of anyone to tell him, that he looked into the face of Ban Cruach.

* * * * *

It was a face made for battles and for ruling, the bony ridges harsh and strong, the hollows under them worn deep with years. Those eyes, dark shad-

ows under the rusty helm, had dreamed high dreams, and neither age nor death had conquered them.

And even in death, Ban Cruach was not unarmed.

Clad as for battle in his ancient mail, he held upright between his hands a mighty sword. The pommel was a ball of crystal large as a man's fist, that held within it a spark of intense brilliance. The little, blinding flame throbbed with its own force, and the sword-blade blazed with a white, cruel radiance.

Ban Cruach, dead but frozen to eternal changelessness by the bitter cold, sitting here upon his cairn for a million years and warding forever the inner end of the Gates of Death, as his ancient city of Kushat warded the outer.

Stark took two cautious steps closer to Ban Cruach, and felt again the shock and the flaring heat in his blood. He recoiled, satisfied.

The strange force in the blazing sword made an invisible barrier across the mouth of the pass, protected Ban Cruach himself. A barrier of short waves, he thought, of the type used in deep therapy, having no heat in themselves but increasing the heat in body cells by increasing their vibration. But these waves were stronger than any he had known before.

A barrier, a wall of force, closing the inner end of the Gates of Death. A barrier that was not designed against man.

Stark shivered. He turned from the sombre, brooding form of Ban Cruach and his eyes followed the gaze of the dead king, out beyond the cairn.

He looked across this forbidden land within the Gates of Death.

At his back was the mountain barrier. Before him, a handful of miles to the north, the terminus of the polar cap rose like a cliff of bluish crystal soaring up to touch the early stars. Locked in between those two titanic walls was a great valley of ice.

White and glimmering that valley was, and very still, and very beautiful, the ice shaped gracefully into curving domes and hollows. And in the center of it stood a dark tower of stone, a cyclopean bulk that Stark knew must go down an unguessable distance to its base on the bedrock. It was like the tower in which Camar had died. But this one was not a broken ruin. It loomed with alien arrogance, and within its bulk pallid lights flickered eerily, and it was crowned by a cloud of shimmering darkness.

It was like the tower of his dread vision, the tower that he had seen, not as Eric John Stark, but as Ban Cruach!

Stark's gaze dropped slowly from the evil tower to the curving ice of the valley. And the fear within him grew beyond all bounds.

He had seen that, too, in his vision. The glimmering ice, the domes and hollows of it. He had looked down through it at the city that lay beneath, and he had seen those who came and went in the buried streets.

Stark hunkered down. For a long while he did not stir.

He did not want to go out there. He did not want to go out from the grim,

warning figure of Ban Cruach with his blazing sword, into that silent valley. He was afraid, afraid of what he might see if he went there and looked down through the ice, afraid of the final dread fulfillment of his vision.

But he had come after Balin, and Balin must be out there somewhere. He did not want to go, but he was himself, and he must.

* * * * *

He went, going very softly, out toward the tower of stone. And there was no sound in all that land.

The last of the twilight had faded. The ice gleamed, faintly luminous under the stars, and there was light beneath it, a soft radiance that filled all the valley with the glow of a buried moon.

Stark tried to keep his eyes upon the tower. He did not wish to look down at what lay under his stealthy feet.

Inevitably, he looked.

The temples and the palaces glittering in the ice....

Level upon level, going down. Wells of soft light spanned with soaring bridges, slender spires rising, an endless variation of streets and crystal walls exquisitely patterned, above and below and overlapping, so that it was like looking down through a thousand giant snowflakes. A metropolis of gossamer and frost, fragile and lovely as a dream, locked in the clear, pure vault of the ice.

Stark saw the people of the city passing along the bright streets, their outlines blurred by the icy vault as things are half obscured by water. The creatures of vision, vaguely shining, infinitely evil.

He shut his eyes and waited until the shock and the dizziness left him. Then he set his gaze resolutely on the tower, and crept on, over the glassy sky that covered those buried streets.

Silence. Even the wind was hushed.

He had gone perhaps half the distance when the cry rang out.

It burst upon the valley with a shocking violence. "Stark! Stark!" The ice rang with it, curving ridges picked up his name and flung it back and forth with eerie crystal voices, and the echoes fled out whispering Stark! Stark! until it seemed that the very mountains spoke.

Stark whirled about. In the pallid gloom between the ice and the stars there was light enough to see the cairn behind him, and the dim figure atop it with the shining sword.

Light enough to see Ciara, and the dark knot of riders who had followed her through the Gates of Death.

She cried his name again. "Come back! Come back!"

The ice of the valley answered mockingly, "Come back! Come back!" and Stark was gripped with a terror that held him motionless.

She should not have called him. She should not have made a sound in that deathly place.

A man's hoarse scream rose above the flying echoes. The riders turned and fled suddenly, the squealing, hissing beasts crowding each other, floundering wildly on the rocks of the cairn, stampeding back into the pass.

Ciara was left alone. Stark saw her

fight the rearing beast she rode and then flung herself out of the saddle and let it go. She came toward him, running, clad all in her black armor, the great axe swinging high.

"Behind you, Stark! Oh, gods of Mars!"

He turned then and saw them, coming out from the tower of stone, the pale, shining creatures that move so swiftly across the ice, so fleet and swift that no man living could outrun them.

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He shouted to Ciara to turn back. He drew his sword and over his shoulder he cursed her in a black fury because he could hear her mailed feet coming on behind him.

The gliding creatures, sleek and slender, reedlike, bending, delicate as wraiths, their bodies shaped from northern rainbows of amethyst and rose: if they should touch Ciara, if their loathsome hands should touch her....

Stark let out one raging catlike scream, and rushed them.

The opalescent bodies slipped away beyond his reach. The creatures watched him.

They had no faces, but they watched. They were eyeless but not blind, earless, but not without hearing. The inquisitive tendrils that formed their sensory organs stirred and shifted like the petals of ungodly flowers, and the color of them was the white frost-fire that dances on the snow.

"Go back, Ciara!"

But she would not go, and he knew that they would not have let her. She reached him, and they set their backs together. The shining ones ringed them round, many feet away across the ice, and watched the long sword and the great hungry axe, and there was something in the lissome swaying of their bodies that suggested laughter.

"You fool," said Stark. "You bloody fool."

"And you?" answered Ciara. "Oh, yes, I know about Balin. That mad girl, screaming in the palace: she told me, and you were seen from the wall, climbing to the Gates of Death. I tried to catch you."

"Why?"

She did not answer that. "They won't fight us, Stark. Do you think we could make it back to the cairn?"

"No. But we can try."

Guarding each others' backs, they began to walk toward Ban Cruach and the pass. If they could once reach the barrier, they would be safe.

Stark knew now what Ban Cruach's wall of force was built against. And he began to guess the riddle of the Gates of Death.

The shining ones glided with them, out of reach. They did not try to bar the way. They formed a circle around the man and woman, moving with them and around them at the same time, an endless weaving chain of many bodies shining with soft jewel tones of color.

They drew closer and closer to the cairn, to the brooding figure of Ban Cruach and his sword. It crossed Stark's mind that the creatures were playing with him and Ciara. Yet they had no

weapons. Almost, he began to hope....

From the tower where the shimmering cloud of darkness clung came a black crescent of force that swept across the ice-field like a sickle and gathered the two humans in.

Stark felt a shock of numbing cold that turned his nerves to ice. His sword dropped from his hand, and he heard Ciara's axe go down. His body was without strength, without feeling, dead.

He fell, and the shining ones glided in toward him.

Twice before in his life Stark had come near to freezing. It had been like this, the numbness and the cold. And yet it seemed that the dark force had struck rather at his nerve centers than at his flesh.

He could not see Ciara, who was behind him, but he heard the metallic clashing of her mail and one small, whispered cry, and he knew that she had fallen, too.

The glowing creatures surrounded him. He saw their bodies bending over him, the frosty tendrils of their faces writhing as though in excitement or delight.

Their hands touched him. Little hands with seven fingers, deft and frail. Even his numbed flesh felt the terrible cold of their touch, freezing as outer space. He yelled, or tried to, but they were not abashed.

They lifted him and bore him toward the tower, a company of them, bearing his heavy weight upon their gleaming shoulders.

He saw the tower loom high and higher still above him. The cloud of dark force that crowned it blotted out the stars. It became too huge and high to see at all, and then there was a low flat arch of stone close above his face, and he was inside.

Straight overhead: a hundred feet, two hundred, he could not tell: was a globe of crystal, fitted into the top of the tower as a jewel is held in a setting.

The air around it was shadowed with the same eerie gloom that hovered outside, but less dense, so that Stark could see the smouldering purple spark that burned within the globe, sending out its dark vibrations.

A globe of crystal, with a heart of sullen flame. Stark remembered the sword of Ban Cruach, and the white fire that burned in its hilt.

Two globes, the bright-cored and the dark. The sword of Ban Cruach touched the blood with heat. The globe of the tower deadened the flesh with cold. It was the same force, but at opposite ends of the spectrum.

Stark saw the cryptic controls of that glooming globe: a bank of them, on a wide stone ledge just inside the tower, close beside him. There were shining ones on that ledge tending those controls, and there were other strange and massive mechanisms there too.

Flying spirals of ice climbed up inside the tower, spanning the great stone well with spidery bridges, joining icy galleries. In some of those galleries, Stark vaguely glimpsed rigid, gleaming figures like statues of ice, but he could not see them clearly as he was carried

on.

He was being carried downward. He passed slits in the wall, and knew that the pallid lights he had seen through them were the moving bodies of the creatures as they went up and down these high-flung, icy bridges. He managed to turn his head to look down, and saw what was beneath him.

The well of the tower plunged down a good five hundred feet to bedrock, widening as it went. The web of ice-bridges and the spiral ways went down as well as up, and the creatures that carried him were moving smoothly along a transparent ribbon of ice no more than a yard in width, suspended over that terrible drop.

Stark was glad that he could not move just then. One instinctive start of horror would have thrown him and his bearers to the rock below, and would have carried Ciara with them.

Down and down, gliding in utter silence along the descending spiral ribbon. The great glooming crystal grew remote above him. Ice was solid now in the slots of the walls. He wondered if they had brought Balin this way.

There were other openings, wide arches like the one they had brought their captives through, and these gave Stark brief glimpses of broad avenues and unguessable buildings, shaped from the pellucid ice and flooded with the soft radiance that was like eerie moonlight.

At length, on what Stark took to be the third level of the city, the creatures bore him through one of these archways, into the streets beyond.

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Below him now was the translucent thickness of ice that formed the floor of this level and the roof of the level beneath. He could see the blurred tops of delicate minarets, the clustering roofs that shone like chips of diamond.

Above him was an ice roof. Elfin spires rose toward it, delicate as needles. Lacy battlements and little domes, buildings star-shaped, wheel-shaped, the fantastic, lovely shapes of snow-crystals, frosted over with a sparkling foam of light.

The people of the city gathered along the way to watch, a living, shifting rainbow of amethyst and rose and green, against the pure blue-white. And there was no least whisper of sound anywhere.

For some distance they went through a geometric maze of streets. And then there was a cathedral-like building all arched and spired, standing in the center of a twelve-pointed plaza. Here they turned, and bore their captives in.

Stark saw a vaulted roof, very slim and high, etched with a glittering tracery that might have been carving of an alien sort, delicate as the weavings of spiders. The feet of his bearers were silent on the icy paving.

At the far end of the long vault sat seven of the shining ones in high seats marvellously shaped from the ice. And before them, grey-faced, shuddering with cold and not noticing it, drugged with a sick horror, stood Balin. He

looked around once, and did not speak.

Stark was set on his feet, with Ciara beside him. He saw her face, and it was terrible to see the fear in her eyes, that had never shown fear before.

He himself was learning why men went mad beyond the Gates of Death.

Chill, dreadful fingers touched him expertly. A flash of pain drove down his spine, and he could stand again.

The seven who sat in the high seats were motionless, their bright tendrils stirring with infinite delicacy as though they studied the three humans who stood before them.

Stark thought he could feel a cold, soft fingering of his brain. It came to him that these creatures were probably telepaths. They lacked organs of speech, and yet they must have some efficient means of communications. Telepathy was not uncommon among the many races of the Solar System, and Stark had had experience with it before.

He forced his mind to relax. The alien impulse was instantly stronger. He sent out his own questing thought and felt it brush the edges of a consciousness so utterly foreign to his own that he knew he could never probe it, even had he had the skill.

He learned one thing: that the shining faceless ones looked upon him with equal horror and loathing. They recoiled from the unnatural human features, and most of all, most strongly, they abhorred the warmth of human flesh. Even the infinitesimal amount of heat radiated by their half-frozen human bodies caused the ice-folk discomfort.

Stark marshalled his imperfect abilities and projected a mental question to the seven.

"What do you want of us?"

The answer came back, faint and imperfect, as though the gap between their alien minds was almost too great to bridge. And the answer was one word.

"Freedom!"

Balin spoke suddenly. He voiced only a whisper, and yet the sound was shockingly loud in that crystal vault.

"They have asked me already. Tell them no, Stark! Tell them no!"

He looked at Ciara then, a look of murderous hatred. "If you turn them loose upon Kushat, I will kill you with my own hands before I die."

Stark spoke again, silently, to the seven. "I do not understand."

* * * * *

Again the struggling, difficult thought. "We are the old race, the kings of the glacial ice. Once we held all the land beyond the mountains, outside the pass you call the Gates of Death."

Stark had seen the ruins of the towers out on the moors. He knew how far their kingdom had extended.

"We controlled the ice, far outside the polar cap. Our towers blanketed the land with the dark force drawn from Mars itself, from the magnetic field of the planet. That radiation bars out heat, from the Sun, and even from the awful winds that blow warm from the south. So there was never any thaw. Our cities were many, and our race was great.

"Then came Ban Cruach, from the south....

"He waged a war against us. He learned the secret of the crystal globes, and learned how to reverse their force and use it against us. He, leading his army, destroyed our towers one by one, and drove us back....

"Mars needed water. The outer ice was melted, our lovely cities crumbled to nothing, so that creatures like Ban Cruach might have water! And our people died.

"We retreated at the last, to this our ancient polar citadel behind the Gates of Death. Even here, Ban Cruach followed. He destroyed even this tower once, at the time of the thaw. But this city is founded in polar ice: and only the upper levels were harmed. Even Ban Cruach could not touch the heart of the eternal polar cap of Mars!

"When he saw that he could not destroy us utterly, he set himself in death to guard the Gates of Death with his blazing sword, that we might never again reclaim our ancient dominion.

"That is what we mean when we ask for freedom. We ask that you take away the sword of Ban Cruach, so that we may once again go out through the Gates of Death!"

Stark cried aloud, hoarsely, "No!"

He knew the barren deserts of the south, the wastes of red dust, the dead sea bottoms: the terrible thirst of Mars, growing greater with every year of the million that had passed since Ban Cruach locked the Gates of Death.

He knew the canals, the pitiful waterways that were all that stood between the people of Mars and extinction. He remembered the yearly release from death when the spring thaw brought the water rushing down from the north.

He thought of these cold creatures going forth, building again their great towers of stone, sheathing half a world in ice that would never melt. He thought of the people of Jekkara and Valkis and Barrakesh, of the countless cities of the south, watching for the flood that did not come, and falling at last to mingle their bodies with the blowing dust.

He said again, "No. Never."

The distant thought-voice of the seven spoke, and this time the question was addressed to Ciara.

Stark saw her face. She did not know the Mars he knew, but she had memories of her own: the mountain-valleys of Mekh, the moors, the snowy gorges. She looked at the shining ones in their high seats, and said,

"If I take that sword, it will be to use it against you as Ban Cruach did!"

Stark knew that the seven had understood the thought behind her words. He felt that they were amused.

"The secret of that sword was lost a million years ago, the day Ban Cruach died. Neither you nor anyone now knows how to use it as he did. But the sword's radiations of warmth still lock us here.

"We cannot approach that sword, for its vibrations of heat slay us if we do. But you warm-bodied ones can approach it. And you will do so, and take it from its place. One of you will take it!"

They were very sure of that.

"We can see, a little way, into your evil minds. Much we do not understand. But: the mind of the large man is full of the woman's image, and the mind of the woman turns to him. Also, there is a link between the large man and the small man, less strong, but strong enough."

The thought-voice of the seven finished, "The large man will take away the sword for us because he must: to save the other two."

Ciara turned to Stark. "They cannot force you, Stark. Don't let them. No matter what they do to me, don't let them!"

Balin stared at her with a certain wonder. "You would die, to protect Kushat?"

"Not Kushat alone, though its people too are human," she said, almost angrily. "There are my red wolves: a wild pack, but my own. And others." She looked at Balin. "What do you say? Your life against the Norlands?"

Balin made an effort to lift his head as high as hers, and the red jewel flashed in his ear. He was a man crushed by the falling of his world, and terrified by what his mad passion had led him into, here beyond the Gates of Death. But he was not afraid to die.

He said so, and even Ciara knew that he spoke the truth.

But the seven were not dismayed. Stark knew that when their thought-voice whispered in his mind,

"It is not death alone you humans have to fear, but the manner of your dying. You shall see that, before you choose."

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Swiftly, silently, those of the ice-folk who had borne the captives into the city came up from behind, where they had stood withdrawn and waiting. And one of them bore a crystal rod like a sceptre, with a spark of ugly purple burning in the globed end.

Stark leaped to put himself between them and Ciara. He struck out, raging, and because he was almost as quick as they, he caught one of the slim luminous bodies between his hands.

The utter coldness of that alien flesh burned his hands as frost will burn. Even so, he clung on, snarling, and saw the tendrils writhe and stiffen as though in pain.

Then, from the crystal rod, a thread of darkness spun itself to touch his brain with silence, and the cold that lies between the worlds.

He had no memory of being carried once more through the shimmering streets of that elfin, evil city, back to the stupendous well of the tower, and up along the spiral path of ice that soared those dizzy hundreds of feet from bedrock to the glooming crystal globe. But when he again opened his eyes, he was lying on the wide stone ledge at ice-level.

Beside him was the arch that led outside. Close above his head was the control bank that he had seen before.

Ciara and Balin were there also, on the ledge. They leaned stiffly against the stone wall beside the control bank, and facing them was a squat, round mechanism from which projected a sort of

wheel of crystal rods.

Their bodies were strangely rigid, but their eyes and minds were awake. Terribly awake. Stark saw their eyes, and his heart turned within him.

Ciara looked at him. She could not speak, but she had no need to. No matter what they do to me....

She had not feared the swordsmen of Kushat. She had not feared her red wolves, when he unmasked her in the square. She was afraid now. But she warned him, ordered him not to save her.

They cannot force you. Stark! Don't let them.

And Balin, too, pleaded with him for Kushat.

They were not alone on the ledge. The ice-folk clustered there, and out upon the flying spiral pathway, on the narrow bridges and the spans of fragile ice, they stood in hundreds watching, eyeless, faceless, their bodies drawn in rainbow lines across the dimness of the shaft.

Stark's mind could hear the silent edges of their laughter. Secret, knowing laughter, full of evil, full of triumph, and Stark was filled with a corroding terror.

He tried to move, to crawl toward Ciara standing like a carven image in her black mail. He could not.

Again her fierce, proud glance met his. And the silent laughter of the ice-folk echoed in his mind, and he thought it very strange that in this moment, now, he should realize that there had never been another woman like her on all of the worlds of the Sun.

The fear she felt was not for herself. It was for him.

Apart from the multitudes of the ice-folk, the group of seven stood upon the ledge. And now their thought-voice spoke to Stark, saying,

"Look about you. Behold the men who have come before you through the Gates of Death!"

Stark raised his eyes to where their slender fingers pointed, and saw the icy galleries around the tower, saw more clearly the icy statues in them that he had only glimpsed before.

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Men, set like images in the galleries. Men whose bodies were sheathed in a glittering mail of ice, sealing them forever. Warriors, nobles, fanatics and thieves: the wanderers of a million years who had dared to enter this forbidden valley, and had remained forever.

He saw their faces, their tortured eyes wide open, their features frozen in the agony of a slow and awful death.

"They refused us," the seven whispered. "They would not take away the sword. And so they died, as this woman and this man will die, unless you choose to save them.

"We will show you, human, how they died!"

One of the ice-folk bent and touched the squat, round mechanism that faced Balin and Ciara. Another shifted the pattern of control on the master-bank.

The wheel of crystal rods on that squat mechanism began to turn. The rods blurred, became a disc that spun

faster and faster.

High above in the top of the tower the great globe brooded, shrouded in its cloud of shimmering darkness. The disc became a whirling blur. The glooming shadow of the globe deepened, coalesced. It began to lengthen and descend, stretching itself down toward the spinning disc.

The crystal rods of the mechanism drank the shadow in. And out of that spinning blur there came a subtle weaving of threads of darkness, a gossamer curtain winding around Ciara and Balin so that their outlines grew ghostly and the pallor of their flesh was as the pallor of snow at night.

And still Stark could not move.

The veil of darkness began to sparkle faintly. Stark watched it, watched the chill motes brighten, watched the tracery of frost whiten over Ciara's mail, touch Balin's dark hair with silver.

Frost. Bright, sparkling, beautiful, a halo of frost around their bodies. A dust of splintered diamond across their faces, an aureole of brittle light to crown their heads.

Frost. Flesh slowly hardening in marbly whiteness, as the cold slowly increased. And yet their eyes still lived, and saw, and understood.

The thought-voice of the seven spoke again.

"You have only minutes now to decide! Their bodies cannot endure too much, and live again. Behold their eyes, and how they suffer!

"Only minutes, human! Take away the sword of Ban Cruach! Open for us the Gates of Death, and we will release these two, alive."

Stark felt again the flashing stab of pain along his nerves, as one of the shining creatures moved behind him. Life and feeling came back into his limbs.

He struggled to his feet. The hundreds of the ice-folk on the bridges and galleries watched him in an eager silence.

He did not look at them. His eyes were on Ciara's. And now, her eyes pleaded.

"Don't, Stark! Don't barter the life of the Norlands for me!"

The thought-voice beat at Stark, cutting into his mind with cruel urgency.

"Hurry, human! They are already beginning to die. Take away the sword, and let them live!"

Stark turned. He cried out, in a voice that made the icy bridges tremble:

"I will take the sword!"

He staggered out, then. Out through the archway, across the ice, toward the distant cairn that blocked the Gates of Death.

Across the glowing ice of the valley Stark went at a stumbling run that grew swifter and more sure as his cold-numbed body began to regain its functions. And behind him, pouring out of the tower to watch, came the shining ones.

They followed after him, gliding lightly. He could sense their excitement, the cold, strange ecstasy of triumph. He knew that already they were thinking of the great towers of stone rising again

above the Norlands, the crystal cities still and beautiful under the ice, all vestige of the ugly citadels of man gone and forgotten.

The seven spoke once more, a warning.

"If you turn toward us with the sword, the woman and the man will die. And you will die as well. For neither you nor any other can now use the sword as a weapon of offense."

Stark ran on. He was thinking then only of Ciara, with the frost-crystals gleaming on her marble flesh and her eyes full of mute torment.

The cairn loomed up ahead, dark and high. It seemed to Stark that the brooding figure of Ban Cruach watched him coming with those shadowed eyes beneath the rusty helm. The great sword blazed between those dead, frozen hands.

The ice-folk had slowed their forward rush. They stopped and waited, well back from the cairn.

Stark reached the edge of tumbled rock. He felt the first warm flare of the force-waves in his blood, and slowly the chill began to creep out from his bones. He climbed, scrambling upward over the rough stones of the cairn.

Abruptly, then, at Ban Cruach's feet, he slipped and fell. For a second it seemed that he could not move.

His back was turned toward the ice-folk. His body was bent forward, and shielded so, his hands worked with feverish speed.

From his cloak he tore a strip of cloth. From the iron boss he took the glittering lens, the talisman of Ban Cruach. Stark laid the lens against his brow, and bound it on.

The remembered shock, the flood and sweep of memories that were not his own. The mind of Ban Cruach thundering its warning, its hard-won knowledge of an ancient, epic war....

He opened his own mind wide to receive those memories. Before he had fought against them. Now he knew that they were his one small chance in this swift gamble with death. Two things only of his own he kept firm in that staggering tide of another man's memories. Two names: Ciara and Balin.

He rose up again. And now his face had a strange look, a curious duality. The features had not changed, but somehow the lines of the flesh had altered subtly, so that it was almost as though the old unconquerable king himself had risen again in battle.

He mounted the last step or two and stood before Ban Cruach. A shudder ran through him, a sort of gathering and settling of the flesh, as though Stark's being had accepted the stranger within it. His eyes, cold and pale as the very ice that sheathed the valley, burned with a cruel light.

He reached and took the sword, out of the frozen hands of Ban Cruach.

As though it were his own, he knew the secret of the metal rings that bound its hilt, below the ball of crystal. The savage throb of the invisible radiation beat in his quickening flesh. He was warm again, his blood running swiftly, his muscles sure and strong. He touched the

rings and turned them.

The fan-shaped aura of force that had closed the Gates of Death narrowed in, and as it narrowed it leaped up from the blade of the sword in a tongue of pale fire, faintly shimmering, made visible now by the full focus of its strength.

Stark felt the wave of horror bursting from the minds of the ice-folk as they perceived what he had done. And he laughed.

His bitter laughter rang harsh across the valley as he turned to face them, and he heard in his brain the shuddering, silent shriek that went up from all that gathered company....

"Ban Cruach! Ban Cruach has returned!"

They had touched his mind. They knew.

* * * * *

He laughed again, and swept the sword in a flashing arc, and watched the long bright blade of force strike out more terrible than steel, against the rainbow bodies of the shining ones.

They fell. Like flowers under a scythe they fell, and all across the ice the ones who were yet untouched turned about in their hundreds and fled back toward the tower.

Stark came leaping down the cairn, the talisman of Ban Cruach bound upon his brow, the sword of Ban Cruach blazing in his hand.

He swung that awful blade as he ran. The force-beam that sprang from it cut through the press of creatures fleeing before him, hampered by their own numbers as they crowded back through the archway.

He had only a few short seconds to do what he had to do.

Rushing with great strides across the ice, spurning the withered bodies of the dead.... And then, from the glooming darkness that hovered around the tower of stone, the black cold beam struck down.

Like a coiling whip it lashed him. The deadly numbness invaded the cells of his flesh, ached in the marrow of his bones. The bright force of the sword battled the chill invaders, and a corrosive agony tore at Stark's inner body where the antipathetic radiations waged war.

His steps faltered. He gave one hoarse cry of pain, and then his limbs failed and he went heavily to his knees.

Instinct only made him cling to the sword. Waves of blinding anguish racked him. The coiling lash of darkness encircled him, and its touch was the abysmal cold of outer space, striking deep into his heart.

Hold the sword close, hold it closer, like a shield. The pain is great, but I will not die unless I drop the sword.

Ban Cruach the mighty had fought this fight before.

Stark raised the sword again, close against his body. The fierce pulse of its brightness drove back the cold. Not far, for the freezing touch was very strong. But far enough so that he could rise again and stagger on.

The dark force of the tower writhed and licked about him. He could not escape it. He slashed it in a blind fury with

the blazing sword, and where the forces met a flicker of lightning leaped in the air, but it would not be beaten back.

He screamed at it, a raging cat-cry that was all Stark, all primitive fury at the necessity of pain. And he forced himself to run, to drag his tortured body faster across the ice. Because Ciara is dying, because the dark cold wants me to stop....

The ice-folk jammed and surged against the archway, in a panic hurry to take refuge far below in their many-levelled city. He raged at them, too. They were part of the cold, part of the pain. Because of them Ciara and Balin were dying. He sent the blade of force lancing among them, his hatred rising full tide to join the hatred of Ban Cruach that lodged in his mind.

Stab and cut and slash with the long terrible beam of brightness. They fell and fell, the hideous shining folk, and Stark sent the light of Ban Cruach's weapon sweeping through the tower itself, through the openings that were like windows in the stone.

Again and again, stabbing through those open slits as he ran. And suddenly the dark beam of force ceased to move. He tore out of it, and it did not follow him, remaining stationary as though fastened to the ice.

The battle of forces left his flesh. The pain was gone. He sped on to the tower.

He was close now. The withered bodies lay in heaps before the arch. The last of the ice-folk had forced their way inside. Holding the sword level like a lance, Stark leaped in through the arch, into the tower.

* * * * *

The shining ones were dead where the destroying warmth had touched them. The flying spiral ribbons of ice were swept clean of them, the arching bridges and the galleries of that upper part of the tower.

They were dead along the ledge, under the control bank. They were dead across the mechanism that spun the frosty doom around Ciara and Balin. The whirling disc still hummed.

Below, in that stupendous well, the crowding ice-folk made a seething pattern of color on the narrow ways. But Stark turned his back on them and ran along the ledge, and in him was the heavy knowledge that he had come too late.

The frost had thickened around Ciara and Balin. It encrusted them like stiffened lace, and now their flesh was overlaid with a diamond shell of ice.

Surely they could not live!

He raised the sword to smite down at the whirring disc, to smash it, but there was no need. When the full force of that concentrated beam struck it, meeting the focus of shadow that it held, there was a violent flare of light and a shattering of crystal. The mechanism was silent.

The glooming veil was gone from around the ice-shelled man and woman. Stark forgot the creatures in the shaft below him. He turned the blazing sword full upon Ciara and Balin.

It would not affect the thin covering of ice. If the woman and the man were

dead, it would not affect their flesh, any more than it had Ban Cruach's. But if they lived, if there was still a spark, a flicker beneath that frozen mail, the radiation would touch their blood with warmth, start again the pulse of life in their bodies.

He waited, watching Ciara's face. It was still as marble, and as white.

Something: instinct, or the warning mind of Ban Cruach that had learned a million years ago to beware the creatures of the ice: made him glance behind him.

Stealthy, swift and silent, up the winding ways they came. They had guessed that he had forgotten them in his anxiety. The sword was turned away from them now, and if they could take him from behind, stun him with the chill force of the sceptre-like rods they carried....

He slashed them with the sword. He saw the flickering beam go down and down the shaft, saw the bodies fall like drops of rain, rebounding here and there from the flying spans and carrying the living with them.

He thought of the many levels of the city. He thought of all the countless thousands that must inhabit them. He could hold them off in the shaft as long as he wished if he had no other need for the sword. But he knew that as soon as he turned his back they would be upon him again, and if he should once fall....

He could not spare a moment, or a chance.

He looked at Ciara, not knowing what to do, and it seemed to him that the sheathing frost had melted, just a little, around her face.

Desperately, he struck down again at the creatures in the shaft, and then the answer came to him.

He dropped the sword. The squat, round mechanism was beside him, with its broken crystal wheel. He picked it up.

It was heavy. It would have been heavy for two men to lift, but Stark was a driven man. Grunting, swaying with the effort, he lifted it and let it fall, out and down.

Like a thunderbolt it struck among those slender bridges, the spiderweb of icy strands that spanned the shaft. Stark watched it go, and listened to the brittle snapping of the ice, the final crashing of a million shards at the bottom far below.

He smiled, and turned again to Ciara, picking up the sword.

* * * * *

It was hours later. Stark walked across the glowing ice of the valley, toward the cairn. The sword of Ban Cruach hung at his side. He had taken the talisman and replaced it in the boss, and he was himself again.

Ciara and Balin walked beside him. The color had come back into their faces, but faintly, and they were still weak enough to be glad of Stark's hands to steady them.

At the foot of the cairn they stopped, and Stark mounted it alone.

He looked for a long moment into the face of Ban Cruach. Then he took the sword, and carefully turned the rings

upon it so that the radiation spread out as it had before, to close the Gates of Death.

Almost reverently, he replaced the sword in Ban Cruach's hands. Then he turned and went down over the tumbled stones.

The shimmering darkness brooded still over the distant tower. Underneath the ice, the elfin city still spread downward. The shining ones would rebuild their bridges in the shaft, and go on as they had before, dreaming their cold dreams of ancient power.

But they would not go out through the Gates of Death. Ban Cruach in his rusty mail was still lord of the pass, the warder of the Norlands.

Stark said to the others, "Tell the story in Kushat. Tell it through the Norlands, the story of Ban Cruach and why he guards the Gates of Death. Men have forgotten. And they should not forget."

They went out of the valley then, the two men and the woman. They did not speak again, and the way out through the pass seemed endless.

Some of Ciara's chieftains met them at the mouth of the pass above Kushat. They had waited there, ashamed to return to the city without her, but not daring to go back into the pass again. They had seen the creatures of the valley, and they were still afraid.

They gave mounts to the three. They themselves walked behind Ciara, and their heads were low with shame.

They came into Kushat through the riven gate, and Stark went with Ciara to the King City, where she made Balin follow too.

"Your sister is there," she said. "I have had her cared for."

The city was quiet, with the sullen apathy that follows after battle. The men of Mekh cheered Ciara in the streets. She rode proudly, but Stark saw that her face was gaunt and strained.

He, too, was marked deep by what he had seen and done, beyond the Gates of Death.

They went up into the castle.

Thanis took Balin into her arms, and wept. She had lost her first wild fury, and she could look at Ciara now with a restrained hatred that had a tinge almost of admiration.

"You fought for Kushat," she said, unwillingly, when she had heard the story. "For that, at least, I can thank you."

She went to Stark then, and looked up at him. "Kushat, and my brother's life...." She kissed him, and there were tears on her lips. But she turned to Ciara with a bitter smile.

"No one can hold him, any more than the wind can be held. You will learn that."

She went out then with Balin, and left Stark and Ciara alone, in the chambers of the king.

* * * * *

Ciara said, "The little one is very shrewd." She unbuckled the hauberk and let it fall, standing slim in her tunic of black leather, and walked to the tall windows that looked out upon the mountains. She leaned her head wearily against the stone.

"An evil day, an evil deed. And now I have Kushat to govern, with no reward of power from beyond the Gates of Death. How man can be misled!"

Stark poured wine from the flagon and brought it to her. She looked at him over the rim of the cup, with a certain wry amusement.

"The little one is shrewd, and she is right. I don't know that I can be as wise as she....

"Will you stay with me, Stark, or will you go?"

He did not answer at once, and she asked him, "What hunger drives you, Stark? It is not conquest, as it was with me. What are you looking for that you cannot find?"

He thought back across the years, back to the beginning: to the boy N'Chaka who had once been happy with Old One and little Tika, in the blaze and thunder and bitter frosts of a valley in the Twilight Belt of Mercury. He remembered how all that had ended, under the guns of the miners: the men who were his own kind.

He shook his head. "I don't know. It doesn't matter." He took her between his two hands, feeling the strength and the splendor of her, and it was oddly difficult to find words.

"I want to stay, Ciara. Now, this minute, I could promise that I would stay forever. But I know myself. You belong here, you will make Kushat your own. I don't. Someday I will go."

Ciara nodded. "My neck, also, was not made for chains, and one country was too little to hold me. Very well, Stark. Let it be so."

She smiled, and let the wine-cup fall.

PROTEUS ISLAND

The brown Maori in the bow of the outrigger stared hard at Austin Island slowly swimming nearer; then he twisted to fix his anxious brown eyes on Carver. "Taboo!" he exclaimed. "Taboo! Aussitan taboo!"

Carver regarded him without change of expression. He lifted his gaze to the island. With an air of sullen brooding the Maori returned to his stroke. The second Polynesian threw the zoologist a pleading look.

"Taboo," he said. "Aussitan taboo!"

The white man studied him briefly, but said nothing. The soft brown eyes fell and the two bent to their work. But as Carver stared eagerly shoreward there was a mute, significant exchange between the natives.

The proa slid over green combers toward the foam-skirted island, then began to sheer off as if reluctant to approach. Carver's jaw squared. "Malloa! Put in, you chocolate pig. Put in, do you hear?"

He looked again at the land. Austin Island was not traditionally sacred, but these natives had a fear of it for some reason. It was not the concern of a zoologist to discover why. The island was uninhabited and had been charted only recently. He noted the fern forests ahead, like those of New Zealand, the Kauri pine and dammar—dark wood hills, a curve of white beach, and between them a moving dot—an apteryx mantelli, thought Carver—a kiwi.

The proa worked cautiously shoreward.

"Taboo," Malloa kept whispering. "Him plenty bunyip!"

"Hope there is," the white man grunted. "I'd hate to go back to Jameson and the others at Macquarie without at least one little bunyip, or anyway a ghost of a fairy." He grinned. "Bunyip Carveris. Not bad, eh? Look good in natural-history books with pictures."

On the approaching beach the kiwi scuttled for the forest—if it was a kiwi after all. It looked queer, somehow, and Carver squinted after it. Of course, it had to be an apteryx; these islands of the New Zealand group were too deficient in fauna for it to be anything else. One variety of dog, one sort of rat, and two species of bat—that covered the mammalian life of New Zealand.

Of course, there were the imported cats, pigs and rabbits that ran wild on the North and Middle Islands, but not here. Not on the Aucklands, not on Macquarie, least of all here on Austin, out in the lonely sea between Macquarie and the desolate Balleny Islands, far down on the edge of Antarctica. No; the scuttling dot must have been a kiwi.

The craft grounded. Kolu, in the bow, leaped like a brown flash to the beach and drew the proa above the gentle inwash of the waves. Carver stood up and stepped out, then paused sharply at a moan from Malloa in the stern.

"See!" he gulped. "The trees, wahi! The bunyip trees!"

Carver followed his pointing figure. The trees—what about them? There they were beyond the beach as they had fringed the sands of Macquarie and of the Aucklands. Then he frowned. He was no botanist; that was Halburton's field, back with Jameson and the Fortune at Macquarie Island. He was a zoologist, aware only generally of the variations of flora. Yet he frowned.

The trees were vaguely queer. In the distance they had resembled the giant ferns and towering kauri pine that one would expect. Yet here, close at hand, they had a different aspect—not a markedly different one, it is true, but none the less, a strangeness. The kauri pines were not exactly kauri, nor were the tree ferns quite the same Cryptogamia that flourished on the Aucklands and Macquarie. Of course, those islands were many miles away to the north, and certain local variations might be expected. All the same—

"Mutants," he muttered, frowning. "Tends to substantiate Darwin's isolation theories. I'll have to take a couple of specimens back to Halburton."

"Wahi," said Kolu nervously, "we go

back now?"

"Now!" exploded Carver. "We just got here! Do you think we came all the way from Macquarie for one look? We stay here a day or two, so I have a chance to take a look at this place's animal life. What's the matter, anyway?"

"The trees, wahi!" wailed Malloa. "Bunyip!—the walking trees, the talking trees!"

"Bah! Walking and talking, eh?" He seized a stone from the pebbled beach and sent it spinning into the nearest mass of dusky green. "Let's hear 'em say a few cuss words, then."

The stone tore through leaves and creepers, and the gentle crash died into motionless silence. Or not entirely motionless; for a moment something dark and tiny fluttered there, and then soared briefly into black silhouette against the sky. It was small as a sparrow, but batlike, with membranous wings. Yet Carver stared at it amazed, for it trailed a twelve-inch tail, thin as a pencil, but certainly an appendage no normal bat ought to possess.

For a moment or two the creature fluttered awkwardly in the sunlight, its strange tail lashing, and then it swooped again into the dusk of the forest whence his missile had frightened it. There was only an echo of its wild, shrill cry remaining, something that sounded like "Wheer! Whe-e-e-r!"

"What the devil!" said Carver. "There are two species of Chiroptera in New Zealand and neighboring islands, and that was neither of them! No bat has a tail like that!"

Kolu and Malloa were wailing in chorus. The creature had been too small to induce outright panic, but it had flashed against the sky with a sinister appearance of abnormality. It was a monstrosity, an aberration, and the minds of Polynesians were not such as to face unknown strangeness without fear. Nor for that matter, reflected Carver, were the minds of whites; he shrugged away a queer feeling of apprehension. It would be sheer stupidity to permit the fears of Kolu and Malloa to influence a perfectly sane zoologist.

"Shut up!" he snapped. "We'll have to trap that fellow, or one of his cousins. I'll want a specimen of his tribe. Rhimolophidae, I'll bet a trade dollar, but a brand-new species. We'll net one tonight."

The voices of the two brown islanders rose in terror. Carver cut in sharply on the protests and expostulations and fragmentary descriptions of the horrors of bunyips, walking and talking trees, and the bat-winged spirits of evil.

"Come on," he said gruffly. "Turn out the stuff in the proa. I'll look along the beach for a stream of fresh water. Mawson reported water on the north side of the island."

Malloa and Kolu were muttering as he turned away. Before him the beach stretched white in the late afternoon sun; at his left rolled the blue Pacific and at his right slumbered the strange, dark, dusky quarter; he noted curiously the all but infinite variety of the vegetable

forms, mar veling that there was scarcely a tree or shrub that he could

identify with any variety common on Macquarie or the Aucklands, or faraway New Zealand. But, of course, he mused, he was no botanist.

Anyway, remote islands often produced their own particular varieties of flora and fauna. That was part of Darwin's original evolution theory, this idea of isolation. Look at Mauritius and its dodo, and the Galapagos turtles, or for that matter, the kiwi of New Zealand, or the gigantic, extinct moa. And yet—he frowned over the thought—one never found an island that was entirely covered by its own unique forms of plant life. Windblown seeds of ocean borne debris always caused an interchange of vegetation among islands; birds carried seeds clinging to their feathers, and even the occasional human visitors aided in the exchange.

Besides, a careful observer like Mawson in 1911 would certainly have reported the peculiarities of Austin Island. He hadn't; nor, for that matter, had the whalers, who touched here at intervals as they headed into the antarctic, brought back any reports. Of course, whalers had become very rare of late years; it might have been a decade or more since one had made anchorage at Austin. Yet what change could have occurred in ten or fifteen years?

Carver came suddenly upon a narrow tidal arm into which dropped a tinkling trickle of water from a granite ledge at the verge of the jungle. He stooped, moistened his finger, and tasted it. It was brackish but drinkable, and therefore quite satisfactory. He could hardly expect to find a larger stream on Austin, since the watershed was too small on an island only seven miles by three. With his eyes he followed the course of the brook up into the tangle of fern forest, and a flash of movement arrested his eyes. For a moment he gazed in complete incredulity, knowing that he couldn't possibly be seeing—what he was seeing!

The creature had apparently been drinking at the brink of the stream, for Carver glimpsed it first in kneeling position. That was part of the surprise—the fact that it was kneeling—for no animal save man ever assumes that attitude, and this being, whatever it might be, was not human.

Wild, yellow eyes glared back at him, and the thing rose to an erect posture. It was a biped, a small travesty of man, standing no more than twenty inches in height. Little clawed fingers clutched at hanging creepers. Carver had a shocked glimpse of a body covered in patches with ragged gray fur, of an agile tail, of needle-sharp teeth in a little red mouth. But mostly he saw only malevolent yellow eyes and a face that was not human, yet had a hideous suggestion of humanity gone wild, a stunning miniature synthesis of manlike and feline characteristics. Carver had spent much time in the wastelands of the planet. His reaction was almost in the nature of a reflex, without thought or volition; his blue-barreled gun leaped and flashed as if it moved of itself. This automatism was a valuable quality in the wilder portions of the earth; more than once he had saved his life by shooting first when startled, and reflecting after-

ward. But the quickness of the reaction did not lend itself to accuracy.

His bullet tore a leaf at the very cheek of the creature. The thing snarled, and then, with a final flash of yellow flame from its wild eyes, leaped headlong into the tangle of foliage and vanished.

Carver whistled. "What in Heaven's name," he muttered aloud, "was that?" But he had small time for reflection; long shadows and an orange tint to the afternoon light warned that darkness—sudden, twilightless darkness—was near. He turned back along the curving beach toward the outrigger.

A low coral spit hid the craft and the two Maoris, and the ridge jutted like a bar squarely across the face of the descending sun. Carver squinted against the light and trudged thoughtfully onward—to freeze into sudden immobility at the sound of a terrified scream from the direction of the proa!

He broke into a run. It was no more than a hundred yards to the coral ridge, but so swiftly did the sun drop in these latitudes that dusk seemed to race him to the crest. Shadows skittered along the beach as he leaped to the top and stared frantically toward the spot where his craft had been beached.

Something was there. A box—part of the provisions from the proa. But the proa itself—was gone!

Then he saw it, already a half dozen cables' lengths out in the bay. Malloa was crouching in the stern, Kolu was partly hidden by the sail, as the craft moved swiftly and steadily out toward the darkness gathering in the north.

His first impulse was to shout, and shout he did. Then he realized that they were beyond earshot, and very deliberately, he fired his revolver three times. Twice he shot into the air, but since Malloa cast not even a glance backward, the third bullet he sent carefully in the direction of the fleeing pair. Whether or not it took effect he could not tell, but the proa only slid more swiftly into the black distance.

He stared in hot rage after the deserters until even the white sail had vanished; then he ceased to swear, sat glumly on the single box they had unloaded, and fell to wondering what had frightened them. But that was something he never discovered.

Full darkness settled. In the sky appeared the strange constellations of the heaven's under hemisphere; southeast glowed the glorious Southern Cross, and south the mystic Clouds of Magellan. But Carver had no eyes for these beauties; he was already long familiar with the aspect of the Southern skies.

He mused over his situation. It was irritating rather than desperate, for he was armed, and even had he not been, there was no dangerous animal life on these tiny islands south of the Aucklands, nor, excepting man, on New Zealand itself. But not even man lived in the Aucklands, or on Macquarie, or here on remote Austin. Malloa and Kolu had been terrifically frightened, beyond doubt; but it took very little to rouse the superstitious fears of a Polynesian. A

strange species of bat was enough, or even a kiwi passing in the shadows of the brush, or merely their own fancies, stimulated by whatever wild tales had ringed lonely Austin Island with taboos.

And as for rescue, that too was certain. Malloa and Kolu might recover their courage and return for him. If they didn't, they still might make for Macquarie Island and the Fortune expedition. Even if they did what he supposed they naturally would do—head for the Aucklands, and then to their home on the Chathams—still Jameson would begin to worry in three or four days, and there'd be a search made.

There was no danger, he told himself—nothing to worry about. Best thing to do was simply to go about his work. Luckily, the box on which he sat was the one that contained his cyanide jar for insect specimens, nets, traps, and snares. He could proceed just as planned, except that he'd have to devote some of his time to hunting and preparing food.

Carver lighted his pipe, set about building a fire of the plentiful driftwood, and prepared for the night. He delivered himself of a few choice epithets descriptive of the two Maoris as he realized that his comfortable sleeping bag was gone with the proa, but the fire would serve against the chill of the high Southern latitude. He puffed his pipe reflectively to its end, lay down near his driftwood blaze, and prepared to sleep.

When, seven hours and fifty minutes later, the edge of the sun dented the eastern horizon, he was ready to admit that the night was something other than a success. He was hardened to the tiny, persistent fleas that skipped out of the sand, and his skin had long been toughened to the bloodthirsty night insects of the islands. Yet he had made a decided failure at the attempt to sleep.

Why? It surely couldn't be nervousness over the fact of strange surroundings and loneliness. Alan Carver had spent too many nights in wild and solitary places for that. Yet the night sounds had kept him in a perpetual state of half-wakeful apprehension, and at least a dozen times he had started to full consciousness in a sweat of nervousness. Why?

He knew why. It was the night sounds themselves. Not their loudness nor their menace, but their—well, their variety. He knew what darkness ought to bring forth in the way of noises; he knew every bird call and bat squeak indigenous to these islands. But the noises of night here on Austin Island had refused to conform to his pattern of knowledge. They were strange, unclassified, and far more varied than they should have been; and yet, even through the wildest cry, he fancied a disturbing note of familiarity.

Carver shrugged. In the clear daylight his memories of the night seemed like foolish and perverse notions, quite inexcusable in the mind of one as accustomed to lonely places as himself. He heaved his powerful form erect, stretched, and gazed toward the matted tangle of plant life under the tree ferns.

He was hungry, and somewhere in

there was breakfast, either fruit or bird. Those represented the entire range of choice, since he was not at present hungry enough to consider any of the other possible variations—rat, bat, or dog. That covered the fauna of these islands.

Did it, indeed? He frowned as sudden remembrance struck him. What of the wild, yellow-eyed imp that had snarled at him from the brookside? He had forgotten that in the excitement of the desertion of Kolu and Malloa. That was certainly neither bat, rat, nor dog. What was it?

Still frowning, he felt his gun, glancing to assure himself of its readiness The two Maoris might have been frightened away by an imaginary menace, but the thing by the brook was something he could not ascribe to superstition. He had seen that. He frowned more deeply as he recalled the tailed bat of earlier in the preceding evening. That was no native fancy either.

He strode toward the fern forest. Suppose Austin Island did harbor a few mutants, freaks, and individual species. What of it? So much the better; it justified the Fortune expedition. It might contribute to the fame of one Alan Carver, zoologist, if he were the first to report this strange, insular animal world. And yet—it was queer that Mawson had said nothing of it, nor had the whalers.

At the edge of the forest he stopped short. Suddenly he perceived what was responsible for its aspect of queerness. He saw what Malloa had meant when he gestured toward the trees. He gazed incredulously, peering from tree to tree. It was true. There were no related species. There were no two trees alike. Not two alike. Each was individual in leaf, bark, stem. There were no two the same. No two trees were alike!

But that was impossible. Botanist or not, he knew the impossibility of it. It was all the more impossible on a remote islet where inbreeding must of necessity take place. The living forms might differ from those of other islands, but not from each other—at least, not in such incredible profusion. The number of species must be limited by the very intensity of competition on an island. Must be!

Carver stepped back a half dozen paces, surveying the forest wall. It was true. There were ferns innumerable; there were pines; there were deciduous trees—but there were, in the hundred yard stretch he could scan accurately, no two alike! No two, even, with enough similarity to be assigned to the same species, perhaps not even to the same genus.

He stood frozen in uncomprehending bewilderment. What was the meaning of it? What was the origin of this unnatural plenitude of species and genera? How could any one of the numberless forms reproduce unless there were somewhere others of its kind to fertilize it? It was true, of course, that blossoms on the same tree could cross-fertilize each other, but where, then, were the offspring? It is a fundamental aspect of nature that from acorns spring oaks, and from kauri cones spring kauri pines.

In utter perplexity, he turned along the beach, edging away from the wash of the waves into which he had almost backed. The solid wall of forest was immobile save where the sea breeze ruffled its leaves, but all that Carver saw was the unbelievable variety of those leaves. Nowhere—nowhere—was there a single tree that resembled any he had seen before.

There were compound leaves, and digitate, palmate, cordate, acuminate, bipinnate, and ensiform ones. There were specimens of every variety he could name, and even a zoologist can name a number if he has worked with a botanist like Halburton. But there were no specimens that looked as if they might be related, however distantly,to any one of the others. It was as if, on Austin Island, the walls between the genera had dissolved, and only the grand divisions remained.

Carver had covered nearly a mile along the beach before the pangs of hunger recalled his original mission to his mind. He had to have food of some sort, animal or vegetable. With a feeling of distinct relief, he eyed the beach birds quarreling raucously up and down the sand; at least, they were perfectly normal representatives of the genus Larus. But they made, at best, but tough and oily fare, and his glance returned again to the mysterious woodlands.

He saw now a trail or path, or perhaps just a chance thinning of the vegetation along a subsoil ridge of rock, that led into the green shades, slanting toward the forested hill at the western end of the island. That offered the first convenient means of penetration he had encountered, and in a moment he was slipping through the dusky aisle, watching sharply for either fruit or bird.

He saw fruit in plenty. Many of the trees bore globes and ovoids of various sizes, but the difficulty, so far as Carver was concerned, was that he saw none he could recognize as edible. He dared not chance biting into some poisonous variety, and Heaven alone knew what wild and deadly alkaloids this queer island might produce.

Birds fluttered and called in the branches, but for the moment he saw none large enough to warrant a bullet. And besides, another queer fact had caught his attention; he noticed that the farther he proceeded from the sea, the more bizarre became the infinite forms of the trees of the forest. Along the beach he had been able at least to assign an individual growth to its family, if not its genus, but here even those distinctions began to vanish.

He knew why. "The coastal growths are crossed with strays from other islands," he muttered. "But in here they've run wild. The whole island's run wild."

The movement of a dark mass against the leaf-sprinkled sky caught his attention. A bird? If it were, it was a much larger one than the inconsiderable passerine songsters that fluttered about him. He raised his revolver carefully, and fired.

The weird forest echoed to the report. A body large as a duck crashed with a long, strange cry, thrashed briefly

among the grasses of the forest floor, and was still. Carver hurried forward to stare in perplexity at his victim.

It was not a bird. It was a climbing creature of some sort, armed with viciously sharp claws and wicked, needle-pointed white teeth in a triangular little red mouth. It resembled quite closely a small dog—if one could imagine a tree-climbing dog—and for a moment Carver froze in surprise at the thought that he had inadvertently shot somebody's mongrel terrier, or at least some specimen of Canis.

But the creature was no dog. Even disregarding its plunge from the treetops, Carver could see that. The retractile claws, five on the forefeet, four on the hind, were evidence enough, but stronger still was the evidence of those needle teeth. This was one of the Felidae. He could see further proof in the yellow, slitted eyes that glared at him in moribund hate, to lose their fire now in death. This was no dog, but a cat!

His mind flashed to that other apparition on the bank of the stream. That had borne a wild aspect of feline nature, too. What was the meaning of it? Cats that looked like monkeys; cats that looked like dogs!

He had lost his hunger. After a moment he picked up the furry body and set off toward the beach. The zoologist had superseded the man; this dangling bit of disintegrating protoplasm was no longer food, but a rare specimen. He had to get to the beach to do what he could to preserve it. It would be named after him—Felis Carveri—doubtless.

A sound behind him brought him to an abrupt halt. He peered cautiously back through the branch-roofed tunnel. He was being trailed. Something, bestial or human, lurked back there in the forest shadows. He saw it —or them— dimly, as formless as darker shades in the shifting array that marked the wind-stirred leaves.

For the first time, the successive mysteries began to induce a sense of menace. He increased his pace. The shadows slid and skittered behind him, and, lest he ascribe the thing to fancy, a low cry of some sort, a subdued howl, rose in the dusk of the forest at his left, and was answered at his right.

He dared not run, knowing that the appearance of fear too often brought a charge from both beasts and primitive humans. He moved as quickly as he could without the effect of flight from danger, and at last saw the beach. There in the opening he would at least distinguish his pursuers, if they chose to attack.

But they didn't. He backed away from the wall of vegetation, but no forms followed him. Yet they were there. All the way back to the box and the remains of his fire, he knew that just within the cover of the leaves lurked wild forms.

The situation began to prey on his mind. He couldn't simply remain on the beach indefinitely, waiting for an attack. Sooner or later he'd have to sleep, and then—Better to provoke the attack at once, see what sort of creatures he faced, and try to drive them off or exterminate them. He had, after all, plenty

of ammunition.

He raised his gun, aimed at the skittering shadow, and fired. There was a howl that was indubitably bestial; before it had quivered into silence, others answered. Then Carver started violently backward, as the bushes quivered to the passage of bodies, and he saw what sort of beings had lurked there.

A line of perhaps a dozen forms leaped from the fringe of underbrush to the sand. For the space of a breath they were motionless, and Carver knew that he was in the grip of a zoologist's nightmare, for no other explanation was at all adequate.

The pack was vaguely doglike; but by no means did its members resemble the indigenous hunting dogs of New Zealand, nor the dingoes of Australia. Nor, for that matter, did they resemble any other dogs in his experience, nor, if the truth be told, any dogs at all, except perhaps in their lupine method of attack, their subdued yelps, their slavering mouths, and the arrangement of their teeth—what Carver could see of that arrangement.

But the fact that bore home to him now was another stunning repetition of all his observations of Austin Island—they did not resemble each other! Indeed, it occurred to Carver with the devastating force of a blow that, so far on this mad island, he had seen no two living creatures, animal or vegetable, that appeared to belong to related species!

The nondescript pack inched forward. He saw the wildest extremes among the creatures—beings with long hind legs and short forelimbs; a creature with hairless, thorn-scarred skin and a face like the half-human visage of a werewolf; a tiny, rat-sized thing that yelped with a shrill, yapping voice; and a mighty, barrel-chested creature whose body seemed almost designed for erect posture, and who loped on its hinder limbs with its fore-paws touching the ground at intervals like the knuckles of an orangutan. That particular being was a horrible, yellow-fanged monstrosity, and Carver chose it for his first bullet.

The thing dropped without a sound; the slug had split its skull. As the report echoed back and forth between the hills on the east and west extremities of Austin, the pack answered with a threatening chorus of bays, howls, growls, and shrieks. They shrank back momentarily from their companion's body, then came menacingly forward.

Again Carver fired. A red-eyed hopping creature yelped and crumpled. The line halted nervously, divided now by two dead forms. Their cries were no more than a muffled growling as they eyed him with red and yellowish orbs.

He started suddenly as a different sound rose, a cry whose nature he could not determine, though it seemed to come from a point where the forested bank rose sharply in a little cliff. It was as if some watcher urged on the nondescript pack, for they gathered courage again to advance. And it was at this moment that a viciously flung stone caught the man painfully on the shoulder.

He staggered, then scanned the line of brush. A missile meant humankind. The mad island harbored something more than aberrant beasts.

A second cry sounded, and another stone hummed past his ear. But this time he had caught the flash of movement at the top of the cliff, and he fired instantly.

There was a scream. A human figure reeled from the cover of foliage, swayed, and pitched headlong into the brush at the base, ten feet below. The pack of creatures broke howling, as if their courage had vanished before this evidence of power. They fled like shadows into the forest.

But something about the figure that had fallen from the cliff struck Carver as strange. He frowned, waiting a moment to assure himself that the nondescript pack had fled, and that no other menace lurked in the brush, then he darted toward the place where his assailant had fallen.

The figure was human, beyond doubt—or was it? Here on this mad island where species seemed to take any form, Carver hesitated to make even that assumption. He bent over his fallen foe, who lay face down, then turned the body over. He stared.

It was a girl. Her face, still as the features of the Buddha of Nikko, was young and lovely as a Venetian bronze figurine, with delicate features that even in unconsciousness had a wildness apparent in them. Her eyes, closed though they were, betrayed a slight, dryadlike slant.

The girl was white, though her skin was sun-darkened almost to a golden hue. Carver was certain of her color, nevertheless, for at the edges of her single garment—an untanned hide of leopard-like fur, already stiffening and cracking—her skin showed whiter.

Had he killed her? Curiously perturbed, he sought for the wound, and found it, at last, in a scarcely bleeding graze above her right knee. His shot had merely spun her off balance; it was the ten-foot fall from the cliff that had done the damage, of which the visible evidence was a reddening bruise of her left temple. But she was living. He swung her hastily into his arms and bore her across the beach, away from the brush in which her motley pack was doubtless still lurking.

He shook his nearly empty canteen, then tilted her head to pour water between her lips. Instantly her eyes flickered open, and for a moment she stared quite uncomprehendingly into Carver's eyes, not twelve inches from her own. Then her eyes widened, not so much in terror as in startled bewilderment; she twisted violently from his arms, tried twice to rise, and twice fell back as her legs refused to support her. At last she lay quite passive, keeping her fascinated gaze on his face.

But Carver received a shock as well. As her lids lifted, he started at the sight of the eyes behind them. They were unexpected, despite the hint given by their ever-so-faint Oriental cast, for they flamed upon him in a tawny hue. They were amber, almost golden, and wild as the eyes of a votary of Pan. She watched the zoologist with the intentness of a

captive bird, but not with a bird's timidity, for he saw her hand fumbling for the pointed stick or wooden knife in the thong about her waist.

He proffered the canteen, and she shrank away from his extended hand. He shook the container, and at the sound of gurgling liquid, she took it gingerly, tilted a trickle into her hand, and then, to Carver's surprise, smelled it, her dainty nostrils flaring as widely as her diminutive, uptilted nose permitted. After a moment she drank from her cupped palm, poured another trickle, and drank that. It did not occur to her, apparently, to drink from the canteen.

Her mind cleared. She saw the two motionless bodies of the slain creatures, and murmured a low sound of sorrow. When she moved as if to rise, her gashed knee pained her, and she turned her strange eyes on Carver with a renewed expression of fear. She indicated the red streak of the injury.

"C'm on?" she said with a questioning inflection. Carver realized that the sound resembled English words through accident only. "Where to?" He grinned.

She shook a puzzled head. "Bu-r-r-o-o-on!" she said "Zee-e-e!"

He understood that. It was her attempt to imitate the sound of his shot and the hum of the bullet. He tapped the revolver. "Magic!" he said warningly. "Bad medicine. Better be good girl, see?" It was obvious that she didn't understand. "Thumbi?" he tried. "You Maori?" No result save a long look from slanting, golden eyes. "Well," he grunted, "Sprechen zie Deutsch, then? Or Kanaka? Or—what the devil! That's all I know—Latinum intelligisne?"

"C'm on?" she said faintly, her eyes on the gun. She rubbed the scratch on her leg and the bruise on her temple, apparently ascribing both to the weapon.

"All right," Carver acceded grimly. He reflected that it could do no harm to impress the girl with his powers. "I'll come on. Watch this!"

He leveled his weapon at the first target he saw—a dead branch that jutted from a drifted log at the end of the coral spit. It was thick as his arm, but it must have been thoroughly rotted, for instead of stripping a bit of bark as he expected, the heavy slug shattered the entire branch.

"O-o-oh!" gasped the girl, clapping her hands over her ears. Her eyes flickered sidewise at him; then she scrambled wildly to her feet. She was in sheer panic.

"No, you don't!" he snapped. He caught her arm. "You stay right here!"

For a moment he was amazed at the lithe strength of her. Her free arm flashed upward with the wooden dagger, and he caught that wrist as well. Her muscles were like tempered steel wires. She twisted frantically; then, with sudden yielding, stood quietly in his grasp, as if she thought, "What use to struggle with a god?"

He released her. "Sit down!" he growled.

She obeyed his gesture rather than his voice. She sat on the sand before

him, gazing up with a trace of fear but more of wariness in her honey-hued eyes.

"Where are your people?" he asked sharply, pointing at her and then waving in an inclusive gesture at the forest.

She stared without comprehension, and he varied his symbolism. "Your home, then?" he pantomimed the act of sleeping.

The result was the same, simply a troubled look from her glorious eyes.

"Now what the devil!" he muttered. "You have a name, haven't you? A name? Look!" He tapped his chest. "Alan. Get it? Alan. Alan."

That she understood instantly. "Alan," she repeated dutifully, looking up at him.

But when he attempted to make her assign a name to herself, he failed utterly. The only effect of his efforts was a deepening of the perplexity in her features. He reverted, at last, to the effort to make her indicate in some fashion the place of her home and people, varying his gestures in every way he could devise. And at last she seemed to comprehend.

She rose doubtfully to her feet and uttered a strange, low, mournful cry. It was answered instantly from the brush, and Carver stiffened as he saw the emergence of that same motley pack of nondescript beings. They must have been watching, lurking just beyond view. Again they circled the two slain members as they advanced.

Carver whipped out his revolver. His movement was followed by a wail of anguish from the girl, who flung herself before him, arms outspread as if to shield the wild pack from the menace of the weapon. She faced him fearfully, yet defiantly, and there was puzzled questioning in her face as well. It was as if she accused the man of ordering her to summon her companions only to threaten them with death.

He stared. "O.K.," he said at last. "What's a couple of rare specimens on an island that's covered with 'em? Send 'em away."

She obeyed his gesture of command. The weird pack slunk silently from view, and the girl backed hesitantly away as if to follow them, but halted abruptly at Carver's word. Her attitude was a curious one, partly fear, but more largely composed, it seemed, of a sort of fascination, as if she did not quite understand the zoologist's nature.

This was a feeling he shared to a certain extent, for there was certainly something mysterious in encountering a white girl on this mad Austin Island. It was as if there were one specimen, and only one, of every species in the world here on this tiny islet, and she were the representative of humanity. But still he frowned perplexedly into herwild, amber eyes.

It occurred to him again that on the part of Austin he had traversed he had seen no two creatures alike. Was this girl, too, a mutant, a variant of some species other than human, who had through mere chance adopted a perfect human form? As, for instance, the doglike cat whose body still lay on the sand where

he had flung it. Was she, perhaps, the sole representative of the human form on the island, Eve before Adam, in the garden? There had been a woman before Adam, he mused.

"We'll call you Lilith," he said thoughtfully. The name fitted her wild, perfect features and her flame-hued eyes. Lilith, the mysterious being whom Adam found before him in Paradise, before Eve was created. "Lilith," he repeated. "Alan—Lilith. See?"

She echoed the sounds and the gesture. Without question she accepted the name he had given her, and that she understood the sound as a name was evident by her response to it. For when he uttered it a few minutes later, her amber eyes flashed instantly to his face and remained in a silent question.

Carver laughed and resumed his puzzled thoughts. Reflectively, he produced his pipe and packed it, then struck a match and lighted it. He was startled by a low cry from the girl Lilith, and looked up to see her extended hand. For a moment he failed to perceive what she sought, and then her fingers closed around the hissing stem of the match! She had tried to seize the flame as one takes a fluttering bit of cloth.

She screamed in pain and fright. At once the pack of nondescripts appeared at the edge of the forest, voicing their howls of anger, and Carver whirled again to meet them. But again Lilith, recovering from the surprise of the burn, halted the pack with her voice, and sent them slinking away into the shadows. She sucked her scorched fingers and turned widened eyes to his face. He realized with a start of disbelief that the girl did not comprehend fire!

There was a bottle of alcohol in the box of equipment; he produced it and, taking Lilith's hand, bound a moistened strip of handkerchief about her two blistered fingers, though he knew well enough that alcohol was a poor remedy for burns. He applied the disinfectant to the bullet graze on her knee; she moaned softly at the sting, then smiled as it lessened, while her strange amber eyes followed fixedly the puffs of smoke from his pipe, and her nostrils quivered to the pungent tobacco odor.

"Now what," queried Carver, smoking reflectively, "am I going to do with you?"

Lilith had apparently no suggestion. She simply continued her wide-eyed regard.

"At least," he resumed, "you ought to know what's good to eat on this crazy island. You do eat, don't you?" He pantomimed the act.

The girl understood instantly. She rose, stepped to the spot where the body of the doglike cat lay, and seemed for an instant to sniff its scent. Then she removed the wooden knife from her girdle, placed one bare foot upon the body, and hacked and tore a strip of flesh from it. She extended the bloody chunk to him, and was obviously surprised at his gesture of refusal.

After a moment she withdrew it, glanced again at his face, and set her own small white teeth in the meat.

Carver noted with interest how daintily she managed even that difficult maneuver, so that her soft lips were not stained by the slightest drop of blood.

But his own hunger was unappeased. He frowned over the problem of conveying his meaning, but at last hit upon a means. "Lilith!" he said sharply. Her eyes flashed at once to him. He indicated the meat she held, then waved at the mysterious line of trees. "Fruit," he said. "Tree meat. See?" He went through the motions of eating.

Again the girl understood instantly. It was odd, he mused, how readily she comprehended some things, while others equally simple seemed utterly beyond her. Queer, as everything on Austin Island was queer. Was Lilith, after all, entirely human? He followed her to the tree line, stealing a sidelong look at her wild, flame-colored eyes,and her features, beautiful, but untamed, dryadlike, elfin—wild.

She scrambled up the crumbling embankment and seemed to vanish magically into the shadows. For a moment Carver felt a surge of alarm as he clambered desperately after her; she could elude him here as easily as if she were indeed a shadow herself. True, he had no moral right to restrain her, save the hardly tenable one given by her attack; but he did not want to lose her—not yet. Or perhaps not at all.

"Lilith!" he shouted as he topped the cliff.

She appeared almost at his elbow. Above them twined a curious vine like a creeping conifer of some kind, bearing white-greenish fruits the size and shape of a pullet's egg. Lilith seized one, halved it with agile fingers, and raised a portion to her nostrils. She sniffed carefully, daintily, then flung the fruit away.

"Pah bo!" she said, wrinkling her nose distastefully.

She found another sort of queerly unprepossessing fruit composed of five finger-like protuberances from a fibrous disk, so that the whole bore the appearance of a large, malformed hand. This she sniffed as carefully as she had the other, then smiled sidewise up at him.

"Bo!" she said, extending it.

Carver hesitated. After all, it was not much more than an hour ago that the girl had been trying to kill him. Was it not entirely possible that she was now pursuing the same end, offering him a poisonous fruit?

She shook the unpleasantly bulbous object. "Bo!" she repeated, and then, exactly as if she understood his hesitancy, she broke off one of the fingers and thrust it into her own mouth. She smiled at him.

"Good enough, Lilith." He grinned, taking the remainder.

It was much pleasanter to the tongue than to the eye. The pulp had a tart sweetness that was vaguely familiar to him, but he could not quite identify the taste. Nevertheless, encouraged by Lilith's example, he ate until his hunger was appeased.

The encounter with Lilith and her wild pack had wiped out thoughts of his

mission. Striding back toward the beach he frowned, remembering that he was here as Alan Carver, zoologist, and in no other role. Yet—where could he begin? He was here to classify and to take specimens, but what was he to do on a mad island where every creature was of an unknown variety? There was no possibility of classification here, because there were no classes. There was only one of everything—or so it appeared.

Rather than set about a task futile on the very face of it, Carver turned his thoughts another way. Somewhere on Austin was the secret of this riotous disorder, and it seemed better to seek the ultimate key than to fritter away his time at the endless task of classifying. He would explore the island. Some strange volcanic gas, he mused vaguely, or some queer radioactive deposit—analogous to Morgan's experiments with X-rays on germ plasm. Or—or something else. There must be some answer.

"Come on, Lilith," he ordered, and set off toward the west, where the hill seemed to be higher than the opposing eminence at the island's eastern extremity.

The girl followed with her accustomed obedience, with her honey-hued eyes fastened on Carver in that curious mixture of fear, wonder, and—perhaps—a dawning light of worship.

The zoologist was not too preoccupied with the accumulation of mysteries to glance occasionally at the wild beauty of her face, and once he caught himself trying to picture her in civilized attire—her mahogany hair confined under one of the current tiny hats, her lithe body sheathed in finer textile than the dried and cracking skin she wore, her feet in dainty leather, and her ankles in chiffon. He scowled and thrust the visualization away, but whether because it seemed too anomalous or too attractive he did not trouble to analyze.

He turned up the slope. Austin was heavily wooded, like the Aucklands, but progress was easy, for it was through a forest, not a jungle.

A mad forest, true enough, but still comparatively clear of underbrush.

A shadow flickered, then another. But the first was only a queen's pigeon, erecting its glorious feather crest, and the second only an owl parrot. The birds on Austin were normal; they were simply the ordinary feathered life of the southern seas. Why? Because they were mobile; they traveled, or were blown by storms, from island to island.

It was mid-afternoon before Carver reached the peak, where a solemn outcropping of black basalt rose treeless, like a forester's watchtower. He clambered up its eroded sides and stood with Lilith beside him, gazing out across the central valley of Austin Island to the hill at the eastern point, rising until its peak nearly matched their own.

Between sprawled the wild forest, in whose depths blue-green shadows shifted in the breeze like squalls visible here and there on the surface of a calm lake. Some sort of soaring bird circled below, and far away, in the very center

of the valley, was the sparkle of water. That, he knew must be the rivulet he had already visited. But nowhere—nowhere at all—was there any sign of human occupation to account for the presence of Lilith—no smoke, no clearing, nothing.

The girl touched his arm timidly, and gestured toward the opposite hill.

"Pah bo!" she said tremulously. It must have been quite obvious to her that he failed to understand, for she amplified the phrase. "R-rr-r!" she growled, drawing her perfect lips into an imitation of a snarl. "Pah bo, lay shot." She pointed again toward the east.

Was she trying to tell him that some fierce beasts dwelt in that region? Carver could not interpret her symbolism in any other way, and the phrase she had used was the same she had applied to the poisonous fruit.

He narrowed his eyes as he gazed intently toward the eastern eminence, then started. There was something, not on the opposing hill, but down near the flash of water midway between.

At his side hung the prism binoculars he used for identifying birds. He swung the instrument to his eyes. What he saw, still not clearly enough for certainty, was a mound or structure, vine-grown and irregular. But it might be the roofless walls of a ruined cottage.

The sun was sliding westward. Too late in the day now for exploration, but to-morrow would do. He marked the place of the mound in his memory, then scrambled down.

As darkness approached, Lilith began to evince a curious reluctance to move eastward, hanging back, sometimes dragging timidly at his arm. Twice she said "No, no!" and Carver wondered whether the word was part of her vocabulary or whether she had acquired it from him. Heaven knew, he reflected amusedly, that he had used the word often enough, as one might use it to a child.

He was hungry again, despite the occasional fruits Lilith had plucked for him. On the beach he shot a magnificent Cygnus Atratus, a black Australian swan, and carried it with its head dragging, while Lilith, awed by the shot, followed him now without objection.

He strode along the beach to his box; not that that stretch was any more desirable than the next, but if Kolu and Malloa were to return, or were to guide a rescue expedition from the Fortune, that was the spot they'd seek first.

He gathered driftwood, and, just as darkness fell, lighted a fire.

He grinned at Lilith's start of panic and her low "O-o-oh!" of sheer terror as the blaze of the match caught and spread. She remembered her scorched fingers, doubtless, and she circled warily around the flames, to crouch behind him where he sat plucking and cleaning the great bird.

She was obviously quite uncomprehending as he pierced the fowl with a spit and set about roasting it, but he smiled at the manner in which her sensitive nostrils twitched at the combined odor of burning wood and cooking meat.

When it was done, he cut her a por-

tion of the flesh, rich and fat like roast goose, and he smiled again at her bewilderment. She ate it, but very gingerly, puzzled alike by the heat and the altered taste; beyond question she would have preferred it raw and bleeding. When she had finished, she scrubbed the grease very daintily from her fingers with wet sand at a tidal pool.

Carver was puzzling again over what to do with her. He didn't want to lose her, yet he could hardly stay awake all night to guard her. There were the ropes that had lashed his case of supplies; he could, he supposed, tie her wrists and ankles; but somehow the idea appealed to him not at all. She was too naive, too trusting, too awe-struck and worshipful. And besides, savage or not, she was a white girl over whom he had no conceivable rightful authority.

At last he shrugged and grinned across the dying fire at Lilith, who had lost some of her fear of the leaping flames. "It's up to you," he remarked amiably. "I'd like you to stick around, but I won't insist on it."

She answered his smile with her own quick, flashing one, and the gleam of eyes exactly the color of the flames they mirrored, but she said nothing. Carver sprawled in the sand; it was cool enough to dull the activities of the troublesome sand fleas, and after a while he slept.

His rest was decidedly intermittent. The wild chorus of night sounds disturbed him again with its strangeness, and he woke to see Lilith staring fixedly into the fire's dying embers. Some time later he awakened again; now the fire was quite extinct, but Lilith was standing. While he watched her silently, she turned toward the forest. His heart sank; she was leaving.

But she paused. She bent over something dark—the body of one of the creatures he had shot. The big one, it was; he saw her struggle to lift it, and, finding the weight too great, drag it laboriously to the coral spit and roll it into the sea.

Slowly she returned; she gathered the smaller body into her arms and repeated the act, standing motionless for long minutes over the black water. When she returned once more she faced the rising moon for a moment, and he saw her eyes glistening with tears. He knew he had witnessed a burial.

He watched her in silence. She dropped to the sand near the black smear of ashes; but she seemed in no need of sleep. She stared so fixedly and so apprehensively toward the east that Carver felt a sense of foreboding. He was about to raise himself to sitting position when Lilith, as if arriving at a decision after long pondering, suddenly sprang to her feet and darted across the sand to the trees.

Startled, he stared into the shadows, and out of them drifted that same odd call he had heard before. He strained his ears, and was certain he heard a faint yelping among the trees. She had summoned her pack. Carver drew his revolver quietly from its holster and half rose on his arm.

Lilith reappeared. Behind her, darker shadows against the shadowy

growths, lurked wild forms, and Carver's hand tightened on the grip of his revolver.

But there was no attack. The girl uttered a low command of some sort, the slinking shadows vanished, and she returned alone to her place on the sand.

The zoologist could see her face, silver-pale in the moonlight, as she glanced at him, but he lay still in apparent slumber, and Lilith, after a moment, seemed ready to imitate him. The apprehension had vanished from her features; she was calmer, more confident. Carver realized why, suddenly; she had set her pack to guard against whatever danger threatened from the east.

Dawn roused him. Lilith was still sleeping, curled like a child on the sand, and for some time he stood gazing down at her. She was very beautiful, and now, with her tawny eyes closed, she seemed much less mysterious; she seemed no island nymph or dryad, but simply a lovely, savage, primitive girl. Yet he knew—-or he was beginning to suspect—the mad truth about Austin Island. If the truth were what he feared, then he might as well fall in love with a sphinx, or a mermaid, or a female centaur, as with Lilith.

He steeled himself. "Lilith!" he called gruffly.

She awoke with a start of terror. For a moment she faced him with sheer panic in her eyes; then she remembered, gasped, and smiled tremulously. Her smile made it very hard for him to remember what it was that he feared in her, for she looked beautifully and appealingly human save for her wild, flame-colored eyes, and even what he fancied he saw in those might be but his own imagining.

She followed him toward the trees. There was no sign of her bestial bodyguards, though Carver suspected their nearness. He breakfasted again on fruits chosen by Lilith, selected unerringly, from the almost infinite variety, by her delicate nostrils. Carver mused interestedly that smell seemed to be the one means of identifying genera on this insane island.

Smell is chemical in nature. Chemical differences meant glandular ones, and glandular differences, in the last analysis, probably accounted for racial ones. Very likely the differences between a cat, say, and a dog was, in the ultimate sense, a glandular difference. He scowled at the thought and stared narrowly at Lilith; but, peer as he might, she seemed neither more nor less than an unusually lovely little savage—except for her eyes.

He was moving toward the eastern part of the island, intending to follow the brook to the site of the ruined cabin, if it was a ruined cabin. Again he noted the girl's nervousness as they approached the stream that nearly bisected this part of the valley. Certainly, unless her fears were sheer superstition, there was something dangerous there. He examined his gun again, then strode on.

At the bank of the brook Lilith began to present difficulties. She snatched his arm and tugged him back, wailing, "No, no, no!" in frightened repetition.

When he glanced at her in impatient questioning, she could only repeat her phrase of yesterday. "Lay shot" she said, anxiously and fearfully. "Lay shot!"

"Humph!" he growled. "A cannon's the only bird I ever heard of that could..." He turned to follow the watercourse into the forest.

Lilith hung back. She could not bring herself to follow him there. For an instant he paused, looking back at her slim loveliness, then turned and strode on. Better that she remained where she was. Better if he never saw her again, for she was too beautiful for close proximity. Yet Heaven knew, he mused, that she looked human enough. But Lilith rebelled. Once she was certain that he was determined to go on, she gave a frightened cry. "Alan!" she called. "Al-an!"

He turned, astonished that she remembered his name, and found her darting to his side. She was pallid, horribly frightened, but she would not let him go alone.

Yet there was nothing to indicate that this region of the island was more dangerous than the rest. There was the same mad profusion of varieties of vegetation, the same unclassifiable leaves, fruits, and flowers. Only—or he imagined this—there were fewer birds.

One thing slowed their progress. At times the eastern bank of the rivulet seemed more open than their side, but Lilith steadfastly refused to permit him to cross. When he tried it, she clung so desperately and so violently to his arms that he at last yielded, and plowed his way through the underbrush on his own bank. It was as if the watercourse were a dividing line, a frontier, or—he frowned—a border.

By noon they had reached a point which Carver knew must be close indeed to the spot he sought. He peered through the tunnel that arched over the course of the brook, and there ahead, so overgrown that it blended perfectly with the forest wall, he saw it.

It was a cabin, or the remains of one. The log walls still stood, but the roof, doubtless of thatch, had long ago disintegrated. But what struck Carver first was the certainty, evident in design, in window openings, in doorway, that this was no native hut. It had been a white man's cabin of perhaps three rooms.

It stood on the eastern bank; but by now the brook had narrowed to a mere rill, gurgling from pool to tiny rapids. He sprang across, disregarding Lilith's anguished cry. But at a glimpse of her face he did pause. Her magnificent honey-hued eyes were wide with fear, while her lips were set in a tense little line of grimmest determination. She looked as an ancient martyr must have looked marching out to face the lions, as she stepped deliberately across to his side. It was almost as if she said, "If you are bound to die, then I will die beside you."

Yet within the crumbling walls there was nothing to inspire fear. There was no animal life at all, except a tiny, ratlike being that skittered out between the logs at their approach. Carver stared around him at the grassy and fern grown interior, at the remnants of decaying fur-

niture and the fallen debris. It had been years since this place had known human occupants, a decade at the very least.

His foot struck something. He glanced down to see a human skull and a human femur in the grass. And then other bones, though none of them were in a natural position. Their former owner must have died there where the ruined cot sagged, and been dragged here by—well, by whatever it was that had feasted on human carrion.

He glanced sidewise at Lilith, but she was simply staring affrightedly toward the east. She had not noticed the bones, or if she had, they had meant nothing to her. Carver poked gingerly among them for some clue to the identity of the remains, but there was nothing save a corroded belt buckle. That, of course, was a little; it had been a man, and most probably a white man.

Most of the debris was inches deep in the accumulation of loam. He kicked among the fragments of what must once have been a cupboard, and again his foot struck something hard and round—no skull this time, but an ordinary jar.

He picked it up. It was sealed, and there was something in it. The cap was hopelessly stuck by the corrosion of years; Carver smashed the glass against a log. What he picked from the fragments was a notebook, yellowedged and brittle with time. He swore softly as a dozen leaves disintegrated in his hands, but what remained seemed stronger. He hunched down on the log and scanned the all-but-obliterated ink.

There was a date and a name. The name was Ambrose Callan, and the date was October 25th, 1921. He frowned. In 1921 he had been— let's see, he mused; fifteen years ago—he had been in grade school. Yet the name Ambrose Callan had a familiar ring to it.

He read more of the faded, written lines, then stared thoughtfully into space. That was the man, then. He remembered the Callan expedition because as a youngster he had been interested in far places, exploration, and adventure, as what youngster isn't? Professor Ambrose Callan of Northern; he began to remember that Morgan had based some of his work with artificial species—synthetic evolution— on Callan's observations.

But Morgan had only succeeded in creating a few new species of fruit fly, of Drosophila, by exposing germ plasm to hard X-rays.

Nothing like this—this madhouse of Austin Island. He stole a look at the tense and fearful Lilith, and shuddered, for she seemed so lovely—

and so human. He turned his eyes to the crumbling pages and read on, for here at last he was close to the secret.

He was startled by Lilith's sudden wail of terror. "Lay shot!" she cried. "Alan, lay shot!"

He followed her gesture, but saw nothing. Her eyes were doubtless sharper than his, yet—There! In the deep afternoon shadows of the forest something moved. For an instant he saw it clearly—a malevolent pygmy like the cat-eyed horror he had glimpsed drinking from the stream. Like it? No, the

same; it must be the same, for here on Austin no creature resembled another, nor ever could, save by the wildest of chances.

The creature vanished before he could draw his weapon, but in the shadows lurked other figures, other eyes that seemed alight with nonhuman intelligence. He fired, and a curious squawling cry came back, and it seemed to him that the forms receded for a time. But they came again, and he saw without surprise the nightmare horde of creatures.

He stuffed the notebook in his pocket and seized Lilith's wrist, for she stood as if paralyzed by horror. He backed away out of the doorless entrance, over the narrow brook. The girl seemed dazed, half hypnotized by the glimpses of the things that followed them. Her eyes were wide with fear, and she stumbled after him unseeing. He sent another shot into the shadows.

That seemed to rouse Lilith. "Lay shot!" she whimpered, then gathered her self-control. She uttered her curious call, and somewhere it was answered, and yet further off, answered again.

Her pack was gathering for her defense, and Carver felt a surge of apprehension for his own position. Might he not be caught between two enemies?

He never forgot that retreat down the course of the little stream. Only delirium itself could duplicate the wild battles he witnessed, the unearthly screaming, the death grips of creatures not quite natural, things that fought with the mad frenzy of freaks and outcasts. He and Lilith must have been slain immediately save for the intervention of her pack; they slunk out of the shadows with low, bestial noises, circling Carver cautiously, but betraying no scrap of caution against—the other things.

He saw or sensed something that had almost escaped him before. Despite their forms, whatever their appearance happened to be, Lilith's pack was doglike. Not in looks, certainly; it was far deeper than that. In nature, in character; that was it.

And their enemies, wild creatures of nightmare though they were, had something feline about them. Not in appearance, no more than the others, but in character and actions. Their method of fighting, for instance—all but silent, with deadly claw and needle teeth, none of the fencing of canine nature, but with the leap and talons of feline. But their aspect, their—their catness was more submerged by their outward appearance, for they ranged from the semi-human form of the little demon of the brook to ophidian-headed things as heavy and lithe as a panther. And they fought with a ferocity and intelligence that was itself abnormal.

Carver's gun helped. He fired when he had any visible target, which was none too often; but his occasional hits seemed to instill respect into his adversaries.

Lilith, weaponless save for stones and her wooden knife, simply huddled at his side as they backed slowly toward the beach. Their progress was maddeningly slow, and Carver began to note

apprehensively that the shadows were stretching toward the east, as if to welcome the night that was sliding around from that half of the world. Night meant—destruction.

If they could attain the beach, and if Lilith's pack could hold the others at bay until Carver could build a fire, they might survive. But the creatures that were allied with Lilith were being overcome. They were hopelessly outnumbered. They were being slain more rapidly with each one that fell, as ice melts more swiftly as its size decreases.

Carver stumbled backward into orange-tinted sunlight. The beach! The sun was already touching the coral spit, and darkness was a matter of minutes—-brief minutes.

Out of the brush came the remnants of Lilith's pack, a half dozen nondescripts, snarling, bloody, panting, and exhausted. For the moment they were free of their attackers, since the catlike fiends chose to lurk among the shadows. Carver backed farther away, feeling a sense of doom as his own shadow lengthened in the brief instant of twilight that divided day from night in these latitudes. And then swift darkness came just as he dragged Lilith to the ridge of the coral spit.

He saw the charge impending. Weird shadows detached themselves from the deeper shadows of the trees. Below, one of the nondescripts whined softly. Across the sand, clear for an instant against the white ground coral of the beach, the figure of the small devil with the half-human posture showed, and a malevolent sputtering snarl sounded. It was exactly as if the creature had leaped forward like a leader to exhort his troops to charge.

Carver chose that figure as his target. His gun flashed; the snarl became a squawl of agony, and the charge came.

Lilith's pack crouched; but Carver knew that this was the end. He fired. The flickering shadows came on. The magazine emptied; there was no time now to reload, so he reversed the weapon, clubbed it. He felt Lilith grow tense beside him.

And then the charge halted. In unison, as if at command, the shadows were motionless, silent save for the low snarling of the dying creature on the sand. When they moved again, it was away—toward the trees!

Carver gulped. A faint shimmering light on the wall of the forest caught his eye, and he spun. It was true! Down the beach, down there where he had left his box of supplies, a fire burned, and rigid against the light, facing toward them in the darkness, were human figures. The unknown peril of fire had frightened off the attack. He stared. There in the sea, dark against the faint glow of the West, was a familiar outline. The Fortune! The men there were his associates; they had heard his shots and lighted the fire as a guide.

"Lilith!" he choked. "Look there. Come on!"

But the girl held back. The remnant of her pack slunk behind the shelter of the ridge of coral, away from the dread fire. It was no longer the fire that fright-

ened Lilith, but the black figures around it, and Alan Carver found himself suddenly face to face with the hardest decision of his life.

He could leave her here. He knew she would not follow, knew it from the tragic light in her honey-hued eyes. And beyond all doubt that was the best thing to do; for he could not marry her. Nobody could ever marry her, and she was too lovely to take among men who might love her—as Carver did. But he shuddered a little as a picture flashed in his mind. Children! What sort of children would Lilith bear? No man could dare chance the possibility that Lilith, too, was touched by the curse of Austin Island.

He turned sadly away—a step, two steps, toward the fire. Then he turned.

"Come, Lilith," he said gently, and added mournfully, "other people have married, lived, and died without children. I suppose we can, too."

The Fortune slid over the green swells, northward toward New Zealand. Carver grinned as he sprawled in a deck chair. Halburton was still gazing reluctantly at the line of blue that was Austin Island.

"Buck up, Vance," Carver chuckled. "You couldn't classify that flora in a hundred years, and if you could, what'd be the good of it? There's just one of each, anyway."

"I'd give two toes and a finger to try," said Halburton. "You had the better part of three days there, and might have had more if you hadn't winged Malloa. They'd have gone home to the Chathams sure, if your shot hadn't got his arm. That's the only reason they made for Macquarie."

"And lucky for me they did. Your fire scared off the cats."

"The cats, eh? Would you mind going over the thing again, Alan? It's so crazy that I haven't got it all yet."

"Sure. Just pay attention to teacher and you'll catch on." He grinned. "Frankly, at first I hadn't a glimmering of an idea myself. The whole island seemed insane. No two living things alike! Just one of each genus, and all unknown genera at that. I didn't get a single clue until after I met Lilith. Then I noticed that she differentiated by smell. She told good fruits from poisonous ones by the smell, and she even identified that first cat-thing I shot by smell. She'd eat that because it was an enemy, but she wouldn't touch the dog-things I shot from her pack."

"So what?" asked Halburton, frowning.

"Well, smell is a chemical sense. It's much more fundamental than outward form, because the chemical functioning of an organism depends on its glands. I began to suspect right then that the fundamental nature of all living things on Austin Island was just the same as anywhere else. It wasn't the nature that was changed, but just the form. See?"

"Not a bit."

"You will. You know what chromosomes are, of course. They're the carriers of heredity, or rather, according to Weissman, they carry the genes that carry the determinants that carry hered-

ity. A human being has forty-eight chromosomes, of which he gets twenty-four from each parent."

"So," said Halburton, "has a tomato."

"Yes, but a tomato's forty-eight chromosomes carry a different heredity, else one could cross a human being with a tomato. But to return to the subject, all variations in individuals come about from the manner in which chance shuffles these forty-eight chromosomes with their load of determinants. That puts a pretty definite limit on the possible variations.

"For instance, eye color has been located on one of the genes on the third pair of chromosomes. Assuming that this gene contains twice as many brown-eye determinants as blue-eye ones, the chances are two to one that the child of whatever man or woman owns that particular chromosome will be brown-eyed—if his mate has no marked bias either way. See?"

"I know all that. Get along to Ambrose Callan and his notebook."

"Coming to it. Now remember that these determinants carry all heredity, and that includes shape, size, intelligence, character, coloring—everything. People—or plants and animals—can vary in the vast number of ways in which it is possible to combine forty-eight chromosomes with their cargo of genes and determinants. But that number is not infinite. There are limits, limits to size, to coloring, to intelligence. Nobody ever saw a human race with sky-blue hair, for instance."

"Nobody'd ever want to!" grunted Halburton.

"And," proceeded Carver, "that is because there are no blue-hair determinants in human chromosomes. But—and here comes Callan's idea—suppose we could increase the number of chromosomes in a given ovum. What then? In humans or tomatoes, if, instead of forty-eight, there were four hundred eighty, the possible range of variation would be ten times as great as it is now.

"In size, for instance, instead of the present possible variation of about two and a half feet, they might vary twenty-five feet! And in shape—a man might resemble almost anything! That is, almost anything within the range of the mammalian orders. And in intelligence— " He paused thoughtfully.

"But how," cut in Halburton, "did Callan propose to accomplish the feat of inserting extra chromosomes? Chromosomes themselves are microscopic; genes are barely visible under the highest magnification, and nobody ever saw a determinant."

"I don't know how," said Carver gravely. "Part of his notes crumbled to dust, and the description of his method must have gone with those pages. Morgan uses hard radiations, but his object and his results are both different. He doesn't change the number of chromosomes."

He hesitated. "I think Callan used a combination of radiation and injection," he resumed. "I don't know. All I know is that he stayed on Austin four or five years, and that he came with only his

wife. That part of his notes is clear enough. He began treating the vegetation near his shack, and some cats and dogs he had brought. Then he discovered that the thing was spreading like a disease."

"Spreading?" echoed Halburton.

"Of course. Every tree he treated strewed multi-chromosomed pollen to the wind, and as for the cats—Anyway, the aberrant pollen fertilized normal seeds, and the result was another freak, a seed with the normal number of chromosomes from one parent and ten times as many from the other. The variations were endless. You know how swiftly kauri and tree ferns grow, and these had a possible speed of growth ten times as great.

"The freaks overran the island, smothering out the normal growths. And Callan's radiations, and perhaps his injections, too, affected Austin Island's indigenous life—the rats, the bats. They began to produce mutants. He came in 1918, and by the time he realized his own tragedy, Austin was an island of freaks where no child resembled its parents save by the merest chance."

"His own tragedy? What do you mean?"

"Well, Callan was a biologist, not an expert in radiation. I don't know exactly what happened. Exposure to X-rays for long periods produces burns, ulcers, malignancies. Maybe Callan didn't take proper precautions to shield his device, or maybe he was using a radiation of peculiarly irritating quality. Anyway, his wife sickened first—an ulcer that turned cancerous.

"He had a radio—a wireless, rather, in 1921—and he summoned his sloop from the Chathams. It sank off that coral spit, and Callan, growing desperate, succeeded somehow in breaking his wireless. He was no electrician, you see.

"Those were troubled days, after the close of the War. With Callan's sloop sunk, no one knew exactly what had become of him, and after a while he was forgotten. When his wife died, he buried her; but when he died there was no one to bury him. The descendants of what had been his cats took care of him, and that was that."

"Yeah? What about Lilith?"

"Yes," said Carver soberly. "What about her? When I began to suspect the secret of Austin Island, that worried me. Was Lilith really quite human? Was she, too, infected by the taint of variation, so that her children might vary as widely as the offspring of the—cats? She spoke not a word of any language I knew—or I thought so, anyway—and I simply couldn't fit her in. But Callan's diary and notes did it for me."

"How?"

"She's the daughter of the captain of Callan's sloop, whom he rescued when it was wrecked on the coral point. She was five years old then, which makes her almost twenty now. As for language—well, perhaps I should have recognized the few halting words she recalled. C'm on, for instance, was comment—that is, 'how?' And pah bo was simply pas bon, not good. That's what she said about the poisonous fruit. And

lay shot was les chats, for somehow she remembered, or sensed, that the creatures from the eastern end were cats.

"About her, for fifteen years, centered the dog creatures, who despite their form were, after all, dogs by nature, and loyal to their mistress. And between the two groups was eternal warfare."

"But are you sure Lilith escaped the taint?"

"Her name's Lucienne," mused Carver, "but I think I prefer Lilith." He smiled at the slim figure clad in a pair of Jameson's trousers and his own shirt, standing there in the stern looking back at Austin. "Yes, I'm sure. When she was cast on the island, Callan had already destroyed the device that had slain his wife and was about to kill him. He wrecked his equipment completely, knowing that in the course of time the freaks he had created were doomed."

"Doomed?"

"Yes. The normal strains, hardened by evolution, are stronger. They're already appearing around the edges of the island, and some day Austin will betray no more peculiarities than any other remote islet. Nature always reclaims her own."

FAR FROM HOME

"Far" is strictly a relative term. Half a world away from home is, sometimes, no distance at all!

Someone must have talked over the fence because the newshounds were clamoring on the trail within an hour after it happened.

The harassed Controller had lived in an aura of "Restricteds," "Classifieds" and "Top Secrets" for so long it had become a mental conditioning and automatically hedged over information that had been public property for years via the popular technical mags; but in time they pried from him an admittance that the Station Service Lift rocket A. J. "Able Jake" Four had indeed failed to rendezvous with Space Station One, due at 9:16 Greenwich that morning.

The initial take-off and ascent had gone to flight plan and the pilot, in the routine check-back after entering free flight had reported no motor or control faults. At this point, unfortunately, a fault in the tracking radar transmitter had resulted in it losing contact with the target. The Controller did not, however, mention the defection of the hungover operator in fouling up the signal to the standby unit, or the consequent general confusion in the tracking network with no contact at all thereafter, and fervently hoped that gentlemen of the press were not too familiar with the organization of the tracking system.

At least one of the more shrewd looking reporters appeared as though he were mentally baiting a large trap so the Controller, throwing caution to the

winds, plunged headlong into a violent refutal of various erroneous reports already common in the streets.

Able Jake did not carry explosives or highly corrosive chemicals, only some Waste Disposal cylinders, dry foodstuffs and sundry Station Household supplies.

Furthermore there was no truth in the oft-revived rumors of weaknesses in the so-called "spine-and-rib" construction of the Baur and Hammond Type Three vessel under acceleration strain. The type had been discontinued solely because the rather complicated structure raised certain stowage difficulties in service with overlong turnabout times resulting.

There may have been a collision with a meteor he conceded, but, it was thought, highly unlikely. And now, the urgent business of the search called, the Controller escaped, perspiring gently.

Able Jake was sighted a few minutes later but it was another three hours before a service ship could be readied and got away without load to allow it as much operating margin as possible. Getting a man aboard was yet another matter. At this stage of space travel no maneuver of this nature had ever been accomplished outside of theory. Fuel-thrust-mass ratios were still a thing of pretty close reckoning, and the service lift ships were simply not built for it.

The ship was in an elliptical orbit and a full degree off its normal course. A large part of the control room was demolished and there was a lengthy split in the hull. There was no sign of the pilot and some of the cargo was missing also. The investigating crew assumed the obvious and gave it as their opinion that the pilot had been literally disintegrated by the intense heat of the collision.

The larger part of the world's population made it a point to listen in on the first space burial service in history over the absent remains of Johnny Melland.

* * * * *

Such a small thing to cause such a fury. A mere twenty Earth pounds of an indifferent grade of rock and a little iron, an irregular, ungraceful lump, spawned somewhere a billion years before as a star died. But it still had most of the awesome velocity and inertia of its birth.

Able Jake, with the controlling influence of the jets cut, had yawed slightly and was now traveling crabwise. The meteor on its own course, a trifle oblique to that of the ship, struck almost directly the slender spring steel spine, the frightful energy of the impact transmuted on the instant into a heat that vaporized several feet of the nose and spine before the dying shock caused an anguished flexing of the ship's backbone; thrust violently outward along the radial members and so against the ribs and hull sheathing on that side. Able Jake's hull split open like a pea pod for fully half its length and several items of its cargo burst from their lashings, erupted from the wound.

Johnny was not inboard at the time, but floating, spacesuited alongside, freeing a fouled lead to the radar bowl, swearing occasionally but without any

real passion at the stupidity of the unknown maintenance man who failed to secure it properly. For some odd reason he had never quite lost the thrill of his first trip "outside," and, donning pressure suit with the speed of long practice, sneaked as many "inspections" as possible, with or without due cause.

The second's fury that reduced the third stage of a $5,000,000 rocket to junk was evident to him only as a brilliant blue-white flash, a hammer-like shock through the antennae support that left his wrist and forearm numb. Then a violent wrench as a long cylinder, expelled from the split hull, caught the loop of his life line and dragged him in till he clashed hard against it, the suddenly increased tension or a sharp edge parting the line close to the anchored end. He clawed blindly for a hold, found something he could not at that moment identify and hung on.

For a short time his vision seemed dulled and that part of his mind, trained to the quick analysis of sudden situations groped but feebly through a haze of shock to understand what had happened. Orienting himself he found he was gripping a brace of the open-mounted motor on one of the Waste Disposal Cylinders. About him he could see other odd items of the cargo, some clustering fairly closely, others just perceptibly drifting farther away. To one side, or "downwards" the Earth rolling vastly, pole over pole, and with her own natural rotation giving an odd illusion of slipping sideways from under him.

Only a sudden sun glint on the stubby swept-back wings showed him where Able Jake was. Far away—too far, spinning slowly end over end. His sideways expulsion from the ship then had been enough to give him and his companion debris a divergent course.

Spacemen accept without question the fact of a ship or a station always at hand with a safety man on watch at all times over those outside and a "bug" within signaling distance constantly. They do not conceive of any other state of affairs.

Now Johnny had to face the fact that he was in such a position—entirely and utterly alone, except for the useless flotsam that came with him. He might have flung himself into a mad chase after the ship on his suit jets except that the thought of leaving his little island, cold comfort though it was, to plunge into those totally empty depths was suddenly horrible.

The tide of panic rose within him. He knew the sickening bodily revolt of blind unreasoning terror—the terror of the lost, the terror of certain untimely death, but mostly of death so dreadfully alone.

He might have gone insane. In the face of the insoluble problem his mind might have retreated into a shadow world of its own, perhaps to prattle happily the last few hours away. But there was something else there. The pre-flight school psychiatrist had recognized it, Johnny himself probably wouldn't have and it wasn't their policy to tell him. It saved him. The labored heart pounding and the long shuddering gasps slowed in time and with the easing of his physi-

cal distress he found enough heart to muster a wry little smile at the thought that of the castaways of history he at least stood fair to be named the most unique.

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And after a while, shaking himself mentally, a little ashamed of his temporary fall from grace, he followed the example of the more intelligent of his predecessors and settled down to itemize his assets, analyze his position and conjecture the chances of survival.

Item: He was encased in a Denby Bros. spacesuit, Mark III, open space usage, meant for no gravity use. Therefore it had no legs as such, the lower half being a rigid cylinder allowing considerable movement within and having a swivel mounted rocket motor at its base controlled by toe pedals inside.

The upper half, semiflexible with jointed arms ending in gloves from which by contorting the shoulders the hands could be withdrawn into the sleeves when not in use.

A metal and tinted plastic helmet with earphones, mike and chin switch. An oxy air-conditioning and reprocessing unit with its spare pure oxygen tank; on this he could possibly depend for twelve hours given no undue exertion and with the most rigid economy all the time.

The power pack for suit operation and radio had a safety margin of one hour over the maximum air supply, if the radio wasn't used. At this time Johnny couldn't see much use for it.

Item: One Waste Disposal Cylinder, expendable, complete with motor and full fuel tanks, packed, according to his loading manifest with sundry supplies to avoid dead stowage space. Seldom used, since most station waste was ferried down in the otherwise empty service ships, they occasionally handled certain laboratory refuse it was considered best to destroy in space. The cylinders were decelerated and allowed to fall into atmosphere where the friction of the unchecked plunge burned up what the magnesium charge inside had not already. The rest of the shipwrecked material had by now drifted beyond easy reach and Johnny did not feel like wasting fuel rounding it up.

Position? A matter of memory and some guesswork by now. Some ten minutes out of powered flight at the time of collision, coasting up to station orbit where a quick boost from the jets would have made up his lost velocity to orbit standard. But there would be no boost now. So he'd just fall off around the other side, falling around and into Mother Earth, to skim atmosphere and climb on past and up to touch orbit altitude—and down again. A nice elliptical orbit, apogee a thousand odd miles, perigee, sixty-seventy— perhaps. How much speed had he left? How long would it be before he brushed the fringe of atmosphere once too often and too deep? Just another meteor.

And survival. A comparatively simple problem since the mechanics of it were restricted by a simple formula in which his role would seem to be a passive one. To survive he must be rescued by his own kind in twelve hours or

less. To be rescued he must be seen or heard. Since his radio was a simple short-range intercom it followed that he must be seen first and heard later. Being seen meant making a sufficiently distinguishable blip on somebody's radar screen to arouse comment over a blip where, according to schedule no orbiting blip should be.

* * * * *

Johnny was painfully aware that the human body is very small in space. The cylinder would be a help but he doubted it would be enough. Then he thought of the material inside the cylinder. He pried back the lugs holding the cover in place with the screwdriver from his belt kit. He started pulling out packages, bags, boxes, thrusting them behind him, above him, downwards; cereals, ready mixed pastries, bundles of disposable paper overalls—toilet paper! He worked furiously, now stuck halfway down the cylinder, kicking the bundles behind him. He emerged finally in a flurry of articles clutching a large plastic bag that had filled the entire lower end of the tank.

About him drifted a sizable cloud of station supplies, stirring sluggishly after his emergence. He pushed them a bit more, distributing them as much as possible without losing them altogether.

Johnny tore open the big bag and was instantly enveloped in clinging folds of ribbon released from the pressure of its packing. He knew what it was now, the big string of ribbon chutes for the Venus Expedition, intended for dropping a remote controlled mobile observer to the as yet unseen and unknown surface. Johnny had ferried parts of the crab-like mechanical monster on the last run, and illogically found himself worrying momentarily over the setback to the Probe his mischance would cause.

But in the next minute he was making fast the lower end of the string to the WD cylinder, then, finding the top chute he toed his pedals and jetted himself out, trailing the string out to its full extent.

Now the period of action was over and he had done all he could, Johnny found himself dreading the time of waiting to follow. He would have time for thinking, and thinking wasn't profitable under the circumstances unless it were something definitely constructive and applicable to his present and future well-being. Waiting was always bad.

Surely they would find him soon. Surely they would press the search farther even when they found Able Jake as they couldn't fail to in time.

A tightness started in his throat. Johnny quickly drowned the thought in a flood of inconsequential nonsense, a trick he had learned as a green pilot. He might sleep though, if sleep were a possible thing in this cold emptiness. No one, to his recollection, had ever done so outside a ship or station—the space psychology types would be interested doubtless.

* * * * *

Johnny tied his life line to the WD cylinder and then jetted clear of his artificial cloud, positioning himself so that

it formed a partial screen between himself and the sun. He turned his oxygen down to the bare minimum and the thermostat as low as he dared. He commenced a relaxation exercise and was pleased when it worked after a fashion—a mental note for Beaufort at the station. A drowsiness crept over him, dulling a little the thin edge of fear that probed his consciousness.

Face down towards the earth he hung. The slow noise of his breathing only intensified the complete silence outside. The well padded suit encompassed him so gently there was no sense of pressure on his body to make up for the weightlessness. Johnny felt as though he were bodiless, a naked brain with eyes only hanging in nothingness.

Beneath, Earth rolled over with slow majesty, once every two hours. His altered course was evident now, passing almost directly over the geographic poles proper instead of paralleling the twilight zone where night and day met. Sometimes he caught the faint glow of a big city on the night side but the sight only stirred the worm of anxiety and he closed his eyes.

Johnny was beginning to feel very comfortable. He supposed sleepily that this was the way you were assumed to feel while freezing to death in a snowbank, or so he'd heard. Air and heat too low perhaps. He should really turn it up a notch.

On the other hand it was perhaps a solution to the problem of dying—a gentle sleep while the stomach was still full enough from the last meal to be reasonably comfortable and the throat yet unparched. Would it be the act of an unbalanced mind or one of the most supreme sanity?

He dozed and dreamed a bit in fragments and snatches but it was not a good sleep— there was no peace in it. At one time he seemed to be standing outside the old fretworked boarding house he lived in—looking in at the window of the "sitting room" where the ancient, wispy landlady sat among her antimacassared chairs and the ridiculous tiny seashell ashtrays that overflowed after two butts. He wanted desperately to get in and sprawl in the huge bat-winged chair by the fire and stroke the enormous old gray cat that would leap up and trample and paw his stomach before settling down to grumble to itself asthmatically for hours.

It was cold and dark out here and he wanted to get in to the friendliness and the warmth and the peaceful, familiar security, but he didn't dare go around to the door because he knew if he did the vision would vanish and he'd never find it again.

He scratched and beat at the window but his fingers made no sound, he tried to shout but his cries were only strangled whispers and the old lady sat and rocked and talked to the big gray cat and never turned her head.

The fire seemed to be flaring up suddenly, it was filling the whole room—a monstrous furnace; it shouldn't do that he knew, but the old lady didn't seem to mind sitting there rocking amid the flames—and it was so nice and warm.

The fire kept growing and swelling though—soon it burst through the window and engulfed him. Too hot. Too hot.

* * * * *

Johnny swam hazily back to consciousness with an aching head and thick mouth. He saw that he had drifted clear of his protective screen somehow and the sun beat full on him. With clumsy, fumbling hands that seemed to belong to somebody else he managed the air valve; the increased oxygen reviving him enough to find the pedals and jet erratically about till he gained the shadow once more.

Now he was entering upon the worst phase of the living nightmare. Awake, the doubts and fears of his position tormented him; wearied, he feared to sleep, yet continually he found himself nodding only to jerk awake with that suddenness that is like a physical blow. Each one of these awakenings took away a little more of his self-control till he was reduced to near hysteria, muttering abstractly, sometimes whimpering like a lost child; now seized with a feverish concern for his air supply. He would at one instant cut it down to a dangerous minimum, then, remembering the near disaster of his first attempt at economy, frantically turn it up till he was in danger of an oxygen jag. In a moment he would forget and start all over again.

In addition, he was now realizing bitterly what he had subconsciously denied to himself for so long, that they had found Able Jake and drawn the obvious conclusion. That he had been obliterated or blown out through the hull by the collision without warning or preparation. That he was undoubtedly dead if not vaporized altogether and, as they must, considering the expense of a probably fruitless search, abandon him.

There came the moment when Johnny accepted this in full. This was directly after the time when, sliding down the long hill to the perigee of his orbit, he turned on his radio and cried for help. It was a bare hundred miles or less to that wonderful world below, but there was the Heaviside layer, and the weak signals beat but feebly against it. All that seeped through by some instant's freak of transmission was a fragment of incoherent babble to reach the uncomprehending ear of an Arkansas ham and give that gentleman uneasy sleep for some time to come.

He kept calling mechanically even after perigee was long past, praying for an answer from the powerful transmitters below or from a searching ship. But when there was no slightest whisper in his phones or answering flare among the stars, Johnny came to the end of faith. Even of awareness, for his own ears did not register the transition of his calls to an insane howling of intermixed pleas, threats, condemnation—a sewer flood of foul vilification against those who had betrayed him.

Bright and beautiful, Earth rolled blandly beneath him, the sun was a remote impersonal thing and the stars mocked silently. After a while the radio carried only the agonized sounds of a man who had forgotten how to cry and must learn again. There were times after this when he observed incuriously a

parade of mind pictures, part memory, part pure hallucination and containing nothing of reason; other times when he thought not at all. The sun appeared to dwindle, retreating and fading far away into a remote place where there were no stars at all. It became a feeble candle, guttered unsteadily a moment and suddenly winked out. Abruptly Johnny was asleep.

* * * * *

He opened his eyes and surveyed the scene with an oddly calm and dispassionate curiosity, not that he expected to find his status changed in any way but because he had awakened with a queer sense of unreality about the whole business. He knew vaguely that he'd had a bad time in the last few hours but could remember little of the details save that it was like one of those fragmentary nightmares in the instant between sleeping and waking when it is difficult to divide the fact from the dream. Now he must reassure himself that this facet of it was real and when he had done so, realized with a faint shock that he was no longer afraid.

Fear, it seemed, had by its incessant pressure dulled its own edge. The acceptance of inevitable death was still there, but now it seemed to have little more significance than the closing of a book at the last page.

It is possible that Johnny was not wholly sane at this point, but there is no one to witness this and Johnny, not given to introspection at any time, felt no spur to self-analysis, beyond a brief mental registration of the fact.

So he made his visual survey, saw that it was real, nothing had changed; noted with mild surprise that he'd somehow remained in the shadow of his screen this time. He had lost track of time entirely but the suit's air supply telltale was in the yellow indicating about two hours more or less to go on breathing. In quick succession he reviewed the events, accepted the probability of the abandoned search without a qualm and made his decision. There was no need to wait about any longer.

A quick flip of the helmet lock, a moment's unpleasantness perhaps, and out. As for the rest—a spaceman needs no sanctified ground, the incorruptible vault of space is as good a place as any and perhaps the more fitting for one of the first to travel its ways.

Well then—quickly. Johnny raised his hands.

But still—

Man has his pride and his vanity. Johnny, though not necessarily prone to inflated valuation of himself still has just enough vanity left to resent the thought of this anonymous snuffing out in the dark. There should be, he thought, at least some outward evidence of his passing, something like—a flare of light perhaps, that would in effect say, if only to one solitary star gazer: "Here at this position, at this instant, Johnny Melland, Spaceman, had his time."

The whimsy persisted. Johnny, casting about mentally for some means to the end recalled the thermite bomb for the WD cylinder and was hauling himself in to it when he remembered the

charges for this lot had gone up with Sally Uncle One two days before. But now he'd actually touched the metal cylinder and, as though the brief contact had completed some obscure mental circuit, the mad idea was conceived, flared up into an irrepressible brilliance and exploded in a harsh bark of laughter.

One last push to his luck then, hardly worse than a gambler's last chip except that the consequences of failure were somewhat more certain. Either way he'd have what he wanted—survival or, in the brief incandescence of friction's heat, a declaration of his passing.

A waste disposal cylinder will carry the equivalent of about three tons of refuse. Its motor is designed to decelerate that mass by 1,075 mph in order to allow it to assume a descending orbit.

Less the greater part of the customary mass, it should be considerably more effective, and since he was already in what constituted a descent path, but for a few miles and a little extra velocity, there would not be the long fall afterwards to pick up what he'd lost.

* * * * *

From there on his plan entered the realm of pure hypothesis; except for

the broad detail the rest depended on luck and whatever freakish conditions might arise in his favor during the operation. These, too, would be beyond his control and any move to take advantage of them would have to be instinctive, providing he was in any shape to do so.

The tendency to gnaw worriedly at a thousand disturbing possibilities drowned quickly in a rapidly rising sense of reckless abandon that possessed him. The prospect of positive action of any sort served to release any tension left in him and almost gayly he moved to set his plan in action.

He jimmied the timer on the rocket motor so it would fire to the last drop. The string of ribbon chutes he reeled in hand over hand stuffing it into the cylinder, discovering in the process why the chute Section hands at Base wore that harried look. The mass of slithering, incompressible white-and-yellow ribbon and its shrouds resisted him like a live thing; in the end Johnny managed to bat and maul the obstreperous stuff down the length of the tank. Even so, it filled it to within a couple of inches of the opening.

Now he cut off a length of his life line and attached one end to the spring-loaded trigger release on the motor control, leaving enough to trail the length of the cylinder and double back inside when he wanted it. He blessed the economically minded powers that insisted on manual firing control on these one-shot units instead of the complex radio triggers beloved of the technical brains.

Making fast to the chutes was a major problem but eventually he managed a makeshift harness of the remainder of the safety line. He wound it awkwardly around himself with as many turns as possible, each returned again and again through, the ring at the end of the master shroud.

By now he was casting anxious glances at the Earth below, aware that he must have passed apogee several minutes before and that not more than some twenty minutes were left before the low point of this swing would be near. He was grimly aware also that it must be this time or not at all. The air telltale was well through the yellow band and the next possible chance after this one was an hour's time away, when conditions inside the suit would be getting pretty sticky.

Jockeying the unwieldy cylinder into line of flight and making it stay there took a lot longer than Johnny counted on. With no other manual purchase than that afforded by his own lesser mass, the job proved almost impossible and he had to use his suit motor. This caused some concern over his meager fuel supply since his plan called for some flat-out jetting later on. In the frantic flurry of bending, twisting, over and under—controlling, the veneer of aplomb began to wear. Johnny was sweating freely by the time he had the cylinder stabilized as best he could judge and had gingerly worked himself into the open end as far as he could against the cushioning mass of ribbon chute. He took the trigger lanyard loosely in hand and craning his neck to see past the bulk of the cylinder he watched and waited.

* * * * *

To the experienced lift pilot there are certain subtle changes in color values over the Earth's surface as one approaches more closely the outer fringe of atmosphere. While braking approaches are auto-controlled, the pilot taking over only after his ship is in atmosphere, the conscientious man makes himself familiar with the "feel" of a visually timed approach—just in case—and Johnny was a good pilot.

Watching Equatorial Africa sliding obliquely towards him Johnny suddenly gave thought to a possible landing spot for the first time. Not that he had any choice but a picture of a cold, wet immersion in any of several possible bodies of water was not encouraging. The suit would probably float but which end first was a matter for conjecture and out of it he would be as badly off for Johnny could not swim a stroke.

Nor had he any clear idea how long it would take to slow down to a vertical drop. Able Jake made a full half swing of the globe to brake down but Able Jake was an ultra-streamlined object with many times the mass and weight of Johnny and his rig; furthermore the ships were controllable to a certain degree while Johnny was not. Beyond the certain knowledge that the effect of the chutes would be quite violent and probably short-lived, the rest was unpredictable.

He tried to shake off gloomy speculation, uneasily aware that much of the carefree confidence of the last hour had deserted him. In a more normal state of mind again he became prey to tension once more, a pounding heart and dry mouth recalling mercilessly the essential frailties of his kind. So, with aching neck and burning eyes he strained for a clear view past the length of the cylinder and—

There! The preliminary to the visual changes, a sudden sweep of distortion over the landscape as his angle of sight through the refracting particles became more shallow. Now was the time he had judged the throat vane gyros should begin their run-up.

He worked the lanyard back carefully, fearful an awkward movement might upset the cylinder's line-up, pulling the trigger lever over to half-cock where the micro switch should complete circuit with the dry power pack. There should be approximately one minute before the major color changes began, which was also the minimum time for gyro run up. Johnny resumed the watching and the waiting.

How long is a minute?

Is it the time it takes the fear-frozen trainee, staring glass-eyed at the fumbled grenade to realize that this one at his feet is a dud?

Or is it the time before the rock-climber, clinging nail and toe to the rock face with the rope snapped suddenly taut, feels it at last slacken and sees the hands gripping safely come into sight?

Perhaps the greenhorn, rifle a-waver, watching the glimpse of tawny color in the veldt-grass and waiting the thunder and the charge, could say.

They'd all be wrong. It's much longer.

Long enough for Johnny to think of a dozen precautions he could have taken, a dozen better ways to rig this or that. Long enough to worry about whether the gyros were really running up as they should. A thousand queries and doubts piled mountainously upward to an almost unbearable peak of tension till suddenly the browns and greens below flashed a shade lighter and it was time, and the savage snap on the lanyard a blessed relief and total committal.

* * * * *

In the few seconds after the firing of the prime and before the busy little timer snapped the valves wide open Johnny managed to slip his toes under the jet pedals to avoid accidental firing. At the same time he braced himself as rigidly as possible with aching arms against the walls of the cylinder.

He saw briefly the flare of the jet reflected off the remnants of his cloud of station stores before deceleration with all its unpleasantness began.

The lip of the cylinder's mouth swept up past his helmet as he was rammed deep into the absorbent mass of ribbon chute. This wasn't a padded contour chair under a mild 3G lift. The chutes took the first shock, but Johnny took the rest the hard way, standing bolt upright.

He found with some surprise his head was right down through the neck ring and inside the suit proper, his arms half withdrawn from the sleeves, knees buckled to an almost unbelievable angle considering the dimensions of the lower case.

He had time to hope fervently the cheap expendable motor wouldn't burn out its throat and send him cart-wheeling through space, or blow the surrounding tanks before the blackout came down.

He came out of it sluggishly, to find

the relief from the dreadful pressure almost as stupefying as the deceleration itself. While his conscious mind screamed the urgency of immediate action, his bruised and twisted body answered but feebly. The condition of complete weightlessness and the springy reaction of the ribbon mass was all that allowed him finally to claw himself out of the cylinder to where he could use the suit jet without fear of burning the precious chutes.

He was so tired. His muscles of their own accord seemed to relax intermittently, interfering with the control of his movements. Only the sudden sight of the Earth, transformed by a weird illusion of position from a bright goal to an enormous, distorted thing, looming, apparently, over him with glowing menace, spurred his flagging resolution to frantic activity.

He jetted straight back trailing his string of chutes behind him, then, before the last was free of the cylinder, kicked himself around to assume the original course once more.

At this stage it was no longer possible, even granted the time, to judge visually how near he was to the atmosphere. The uneasy feeling that he must already be brushing the Troposphere jarred his nerve so that he merely gave himself a short flat-out boost in the right direction before spinning bodily one hundred eighty degrees so that he was traveling feet first.

Reflected in the curved helmet face, the string of chutes obediently followed-my-leader around a ragged U-shape, the last—the small pilot-chute trailed limply around as he watched.

There could surely be but a few seconds left before the grand finale. Johnny found he was unconsciously holding his breath, and, as he deliberately inhaled long slow draughts of his already staling air, realized abstractly that he seemed to be attempting to meet his possible end with some degree of dignity if not with resignation, and wondered if he were the exception or the rule.

Possibly, he thought sardonically, because there is so little room for dignity in our living years, and was mildly surprised at an uncharacteristic excursion into the realm of philosophy.

There was a faintly perceptible tug on the harness. It was sustained and now there came a definite strain. Reflected for a moment in the helmet face was a glimpse of the lead chute slowly opening out like a gigantic flower.

Then swiftly, in half a breath the harness coils were tightening about him like steel fingers, the heavy ring at the end of the master shroud clashed against the back of his helmet and began a sickening, thrumming vibration there.

The harness encompassed his torso like a vise but his legs were unsupported and weighed what seemed a thousand tons. He could feel them stretching. Somewhere a coil slipped a fraction. His arms were jerked suddenly upwards and Johnny knew a sensation he'd never believed possible. At the same time his leaden feet crashed down

on the jet pedals. For a few, brief, blessed moments the intolerable extension eased a fraction with the firing of the suit jets.

He cringed mentally from the thought of what was to come and thought hazily: "This is what the rack was like. This is going to be bad, bad, bad!" It was impossible and Johnny went out with the last drop of fuel.

* * * * *

Somewhere there was a queer coughing sound like wind through a crevice. He strained to identify it but an awful agony swamped him and he fled before it back into the darkness.

And later still a thumping and a rushing, gurgling sound.

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Dim, grotesque figures moved about him or swooped and hovered over him. He felt an unreasoning fear of them and tried to shut them out. They were holding him down, hurting him. One was pulling and twisting at his arm. He shouted and swore at it telling it to leave him alone, but it ignored him or didn't seem to hear. There was a sudden dull snapping sound and a little of the pain abated.

The figures flowed together and swirled around like some great oily vortex but never quite left him.

Then there was a time when they separated jerkily and became the hazy but definable figures of men in rough seaman's clothes. Johnny had never heard Breton French before; in his dazed condition the apparently insane gabble might well have been the tongue of another world and gave him little assurance. He hurt so badly and so generally that he could not have determined that he was lying down save for a view of white clouds scudding overhead.

Some of the men were holding up what looked like a crumpled parody of a man. He recognized it without surprise as the soaking remains of his spacesuit, battered and with tattered shreds of outer cover and insulation hanging in festoons.

A sharp, bearded face shot into focus abruptly, waving a hypodermic needle. It spoke English and observed passionately either to Johnny or itself that: "Name of a Spanish cow! What is it in men that they must abuse themselves so? Now here is one who was both squeezed and stretched alternately as well as hammered, dehydrated and almost asphyxiated, is it not? This will bear watching. It is alive but there will have to be X-rays in profusion."

It danced long sensitive fingers over the welts and bruises and commented bluntly that it was well the fishermen had returned his arms and legs into their sockets before he fully regained consciousness. It muttered and clucked to itself as it used the hypo which Johnny could not feel. "Formidable!"

The pleasant drowsiness came down just as he was identifying the queer smell as ozone, brine and good fresh air.

After a while they moved him to a small hospital in an upcoast town, where he slept much, suffered not a little and, even waking, viewed the world incuri-

ously through drug-laden eyes. Finally they allowed him to waken fully and the sharp-faced doctor, together with half a dozen others from various parts of the world decided that, after all, he seemed to be surviving.

Johnny lay and itched intolerably in the cast that covered him from nape to thigh and listened to the bustling of the elderly nursing sister who, good soul, having never been more than ten miles from her town in her life, reminded him that it wanted but two days to Christmas and opined that: "Such a tragedy for M'sieu. To be so far from home!"

Johnny smiled at the ceiling, not daring to laugh yet, and sniffed at the salt sea air with its undertone of rank seaweed and gloried in it; even a chance whiff of that particular cigarette tobacco that only a Frenchman can appreciate. He thought that here, as across the water, night and day followed each other in their proper order and the ground was a solid thing beneath the feet.

Why—he could never be closer.